

CHICKEN POX

The information below will help you determine if chicken pox infection represents an increased fetal risk. With every pregnancy, all women have a 3 to 5 percent chance of having a baby with a birth defect.

What is chicken pox?

Chicken pox, also called varcella, is a viral infection that usually occurs in childhood. The most common symptom is a rash, which first appears as small reddish spots or pimples. These spots blister and then scab over. New spots appear for up to 3-5 days. Often a fever and body aches occur before the rash appears. Pneumonia occurs in 10-15 percent of teenagers and adults who have chicken pox.

Is chicken pox contagious?

Yes, chicken pox is highly contagious. A person who has chicken pox is contagious until all their spots are scabbed over. If you have never had chicken pox before, there is a 90 percent chance that you will catch it if someone in your house has it. Infection occurs less often after exposure in other places, such as a school.

The period between the time a person is exposed to chicken pox and the time he/she develops symptoms is called the incubation period. For chicken pox, the incubation period ranges from 10 to 21 days.

I don't think I've had chicken pox and have recently been exposed. Is there anything I can do?

The first thing you should do is have your health care professional do a blood test to see if you have any antibodies to the chicken pox virus. Up to 95 percent of women who do not think or know if they ever had chicken pox will have antibodies on a blood test.

You are not immune if a blood test shows you do not have antibodies to the chicken pox virus. If you are not immune, you are at risk for being infected. In that case, you may take zoster immune globulin (ZIG) after being directly exposed. ZIG is a blood product that contains high levels of chicken pox antibodies. ZIG causes the chicken pox infection to be less severe. In some case, ZIG may help prevent infection in pregnancy and may be recommend for non-immune pregnant women after direct exposure.

The use of the chicken pox vaccine is not recommended during pregnancy. This is because there is not enough information about its effects on a fetus to determine its safety.

I'm pregnant and have just been exposed to chicken pox. I had chicken pox when I was a child. Is there any risk to my baby?

When a person has chicken pox, he/she makes antibodies to the virus. These antibodies last a long time and make a person immune to chicken pox. People who are immune most likely will not develop chicken pox if they are exposed again. But you should be sure that you had chicken pox and not some other similar disease.

I had chicken pox at 10 weeks of pregnancy. Is my baby at an increased risk for birth defects?

Most babies born to women who have chicken pox in pregnancy are normal. However, 1-2 percent of the babies whose mothers had chicken pox in pregnancy have one or more birth defects due to the infection.

The virus that causes chicken pox infects the fetus 25 percent of the time. Sometimes, infection of the fetus causes a pattern of birth defects called the varicella embryopathy. The birth defects seen include scars, eye problems, poor growth, underdevelopment of an arm or leg, small head, delayed development and/or mental retardation. Some babies may have only one of these problems while others have some or all.

The greatest risk for birth defects is when the mother develops chicken pox between 8 and 20 weeks of pregnancy. The risk for birth defects due to chicken pox infection in the first trimester of pregnancy is 0.5-1 percent. When chicken pox occurs between 13 and 20 weeks of pregnancy, the risk for birth defects appears to be 2 percent.

Is there any test I can have in pregnancy to see if my baby has birth defects from my chicken pox infection?

During a targeted ultrasound, a doctor uses sound waves to take a very close look at the fetus. Between the 18th and 20th week of pregnancy, the doctor may be able to see limb defects and brain problems that may have been caused by chicken pox infection. Usually several ultrasound exams are needed to check for growth problems. Sometimes the ultrasound can show extra amniotic fluid, liver problems, or severe swelling of the fetus that the chicken pox may have caused. Ultrasound cannot pick up all birth defects that can be caused by chicken pox in pregnancy.