CHICKEN POX AND SHINGLES
(Varicella Zoster)

What is it?

Chicken pox and shingles are caused by the same virus and are characterised by blisters. You can only develop shingles if you have had chicken pox in the past.

How do I know someone has chicken pox?

It usually begins with a sudden onset of slight fever (temperature), feeling unwell and an itchy rash starting with flat red spots which become raised and filled with fluid. The rash is usually on the body more than on the face and limbs. Spots commonly occur in successive groups and scab over 3 - 4 days after appearing.

How do I know someone has shingles?

It is characterised by pain and blisters on one side of the face or body.

Are they infectious?

Chickenpox is commonly spread from person to person by virus shed from the nose and throat as droplets or by direct contact. The fluid inside the blister is infectious. The illness is infectious form 1 - 2 days before and until 5 days after blisters appear.

Shingles is not infectious unless you touch the fluid in the blisters, when you could develop chicken pox; you cannot catch shingles.

What are the incubation periods?

Chicken pox may appear 13 to 17 days after contact with an infected person.

Shingles occurs any time, particularly in old people or those whose defences are low.

What should I do if someone has chicken pox or shingles?

- Someone with chicken pox, should rest while they have fever and discomfort.
- Chickenpox during pregnancy can affect the unborn child. If a woman is exposed to chickenpox during the first 20 weeks or the last 3 weeks of pregnancy, she should inform whoever is giving her antenatal care immediately.
- Keep a child with a fever cool by reducing the amount of clothing or bedding and by giving paracetamol as prescribed on the bottle.

- Shingles can be treated with a drug that kills the virus, and with painkillers.
- People infected with chicken pox or shingles should avoid contact with newborn babies, mothers 5 days before and 2 days after delivery and immunosuppressed persons, because the illnesses are more serious in them.
- Make sure handkerchiefs and any article having contact with the blisters are washed well in a washing machine or hot soapy water. Always wash your hands well after handling them.
- Use a calamine based lotion or cream on blisters to soothe itching.
- Make sure hands are washed after any touching or treating of the blisters.

- How soon can someone return to school / work?
- A person should stay away until 5 days after the rash appears.

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