

## EXPOSURE TO VARICELLA

- **What is varicella and how is it spread?**

Varicella zoster is chickenpox--a viral illness characterized by a sudden onset of a slight fever and mild symptoms such as runny nose and cough, and a generalized, itchy, raised red rash. It is caused by the varicella-zoster virus. A variety of complications can occur, including bacterial infections, pneumonia, encephalitis, and meningitis.

The virus persists in a latent (hidden) form after the primary infection; reactivation results in herpes zoster ("shingles").

The virus is highly contagious. Persons are infected when the virus comes in contact with the mucosa of the upper respiratory tract or the eyes. Person-to-person transmission occurs by direct contact by way of airborne spread of secretions from the respiratory tract of chickenpox cases and rarely from the vesicle fluid of zoster lesions. Direct contact is defined as at least five minutes of direct face to face contact without wearing a mask

- **What is considered to be an exposure to varicella?**

Patients are considered Infectious with varicella if any one of the following conditions is met. **By the airborne route:**

- Primary Varicella Infection with a generalized rash (chicken pox)
- Disseminated Herpes Zoster (shingles) defined as involvement of more than one nerve root distribution.
- Herpes Zoster (shingles) in an immunosuppressed patient

**By the contact route:**

- Direct skin to skin contact with the vesicles of any infected person

A person is considered to be exposed to varicella if he/she is not wearing an mask and has contact with a person with chickenpox for at least five minutes at a time when the person with chickenpox is unmasked. Patients with chickenpox are most contagious for 1 to 2 days before and shortly after the onset of the rash, but contagiousness may persist until all the lesions have crusted (approximately 5 days).

- **What should I do if I am exposed?**

If you are exposed to someone with chickenpox and are immune, you do not need to alter your activities. You should not develop chickenpox and cannot spread the disease to others.

If you are exposed to someone with chickenpox and are not immune, you may develop chickenpox yourself and be contagious to others. The incubation period (the time between exposure to infection and the appearance of the first symptom) is 10-21 days, generally 12-14 days after exposure. Since you are contagious to others for up to two days before the characteristic rash appears, you should isolate yourself for 8-21 days after the exposure.

- **How will I know if I am immune?**

Vanderbilt University Medical Center has a policy that requires all faculty/staff members to have blood drawn to determine varicella immunity status at the time of the initial immunization and screening visit. You may contact the VOHC (Vanderbilt Occupational Health Clinic, Room 640 Medical Arts Building, phone 936-0955) to access your result.

- **What if my exposure occurs at work?**

In the event of an exposure within the Medical Center, Infection Control will notify the VOHC of the faculty/staff members who have been exposed. The VOHC will determine each faculty/staff member's immunity status by accessing results from a computer database and from medical records if necessary. If the faculty/staff member is immune, no further action will be taken. If the faculty/staff member is not immune, that person and the person's manager will be notified that the non-immune person must remain off work from days 8-21 following the exposure.

At this point, the manager should forward a Tennessee First Report of Work Injury to the Office of Risk Management (Room 610 Oxford House, phone 936-0660). If the disease has not begun at the end of 21 days, the faculty/staff member may return to work. If the disease begins during the incubation period, the person should contact the VOHC and Risk Management.

If VOHC does not have a record of your immunity status, you will be required to have blood drawn as soon as possible to determine if you are or are not immune (a prior history of chickenpox is not sufficient proof of immunity in this situation). If the results are not available prior to the first day of the incubation period, Infection Control will be consulted and a decision will be made regarding whether or not you may be permitted to work pending the lab results.

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