

## What to do?

If you are pregnant it is a good idea to:

- Avoid contact with anyone who has chickenpox, if possible
- If you do not think you have had chickenpox and you have had contact with someone who is infectious, contact your family doctor or midwife/LMC immediately. Your immunity can be checked with a blood test and medication can be given to help protect you from developing chickenpox if needed.
- If you develop chickenpox while you are pregnant, contact your family doctor or LMC straightaway. Medication can help reduce the severity of the disease.
- If you have a very young baby, avoid anyone with chickenpox touching or breathing on your baby.
- If you are not pregnant and have never had chickenpox, talk to your family doctor about getting vaccinated. At present, the vaccine is not free for adults but has recently become part of the immunisation schedule for children at 15 months of age (with a catch-up for 11 year olds)

## References:

Lamont, Sobel, Carrington et al “Varicella –zoster virus infection in pregnancy”, BJOG, 2011.

Counties Manukau Health guideline “Chickenpox in Pregnancy”, Oct.2018

Ministry of Health 2017. “Immunisation Handbook 2017”.

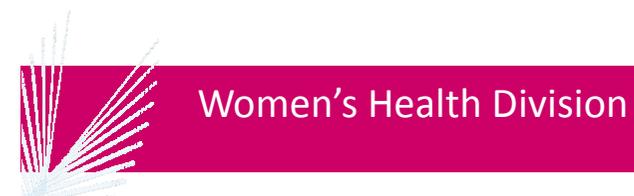
Mandelbrot, L “Fetal varicella – diagnosis, management and outcomes”. 2012.

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# Chickenpox in Pregnancy

A guide for women and whaanau



## What is Chickenpox?

Chickenpox (also known as Varicella) is a common, highly infectious disease.

In New Zealand, 90% of people born here will have been infected by the age of fourteen. One infection usually protects you from ever getting it again.

Getting chickenpox as a child is unpleasant but not usually dangerous.

However, it can be much more severe if you contract it as an adult, and if you are pregnant there are particular risks for you and your baby.

Women who grew up outside New Zealand in a warmer climate are less likely to have had chickenpox and thus are more at risk.

Chickenpox is passed on via:

- Close contact with someone who is contagious (face-to-face contact for longer than 5 minutes),
- sneezing, or
- touching the spots themselves.

The spots look like blisters and are very itchy. They tend to appear on the face and head first, then body, then arms and legs.



- Incubation (the time between being exposed and getting blisters) is 10 – 21 days.

- People can pass on the virus two days before blisters appear, until all the blisters are dry and crusted over.
- New blisters usually stop appearing after about four days.

## Risks

If you get chickenpox while you are pregnant you can become very ill because being pregnant reduces your immunity, especially after 20 weeks.

There is a chance of developing pneumonia if you do not seek treatment, so it's important to see your family doctor or midwife/LMC (Lead Maternity Carer).

There are two risks for babies – one is “Congenital Varicella Syndrome” (CVS) which affects the baby's growth and development in the womb. Depending on how many weeks pregnant you are when you get chickenpox:

- Under 12 weeks the risk is low – 1 baby affected per 250 women with chickenpox (0.4%)
- 13 – 20 weeks: the risk is about 2 babies per 100 women (2%)
- Over 20 weeks - It is very rare to occur.

The other complication that can occur is if you develop chickenpox close to the time you give birth:

- If you get chickenpox five days before, to two days after birth, your baby has not had time to develop immunity and up to 50% of babies can develop Neonatal Chickenpox and become sick.