Chickenpox ? Do I need to stay home from class?  [1]

Dear Alice,

I've come down with chickenpox. Should I stay home from classes even though 90% of adults have already had it and are thus immune? If I take great care washing my hands and avoiding coughing anywhere but into the crook of my arm, will I be reasonably assured of not spreading it?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Dealing with chickenpox can be difficult, especially when you're unable to press the 'pause' button on your busy schedule while you recuperate. And although you are no doubt itching to get back to normalcy, it's best for your health and the health of others that you stay home and do not go to class. Caused by the highly contagious varicella-zoster virus, chickenpox is spread through inhalation of droplets dispersed into the air by coughing and sneezing as well as through direct contact with the skin. Although many adults are indeed immune to chickenpox, some aren't (as you're experiencing for yourself). Because the virus is spread so easily, people affected by chickenpox should steer clear of contact with others until the lesions have dried and crusted over into scabs ? usually between four to seven days after the initial onset of symptoms.

If you haven't already contacted your health care provider, schedule an appointment as soon as possible for proper diagnosis and treatment recommendations. If you're a Columbia student, you can schedule an appointment with Medical Services (Morningside) [2] or the Student Health Service (CUMC) [3]. Although most cases of chickenpox do not require medical treatment, your health care provider will assess whether you fall into a high-risk group who are more likely to experience various complications. If it's appropriate, your provider may decide to prescribe creams or oral medications (though this is rare).

Also called varicella, chickenpox is often associated with a telltale itchy rash, as well as fever, poor appetite, headache, and tiredness. Fortunately, the great majority of chickenpox infections last no longer than 10 days. The chickenpox rash is characterized by three distinct phases: first, the initial breakout of pink bumps; next, fluid-filled blisters; and finally, crusts and scabs. Once you've reached phase three, you're good to go back to school or work.

The best way to accelerate the healing process is to avoid scratching. Although it's tempting, scratching can slow healing and cause infection, prolonging your recovery. Try dabbing...
calamine lotion on itchy spots, and do not attempt to pop fluid-filled blisters. Adults can experience temporarily relief from itching through the use of an oral or topical antihistamine, such as diphenhydramine (Benadryl ®). Adults and children with chickenpox may benefit from taking lukewarm soothing baths with baking soda and plain, uncooked oatmeal. To treat a fever, taking acetaminophen (Tylenol ®) may help. Do not take any medications that contain aspirin, as this may lead to a serious condition called Reye’s syndrome [4].

While you heal, get lots of rest and avoid contact with others. If you’re concerned about staying on top of your schoolwork, you may be able to use this personal time to catch up on reading and homework. Columbia students who will miss more than a couple of class sessions due to chickenpox should contact their professor(s) as well as their academic advisor to discuss make-up work or reschedule exams that are scheduled to take place during the course of the infection.

Individuals who haven’t already had the chickenpox should consider contacting their health care providers about vaccination. Columbia students who have paid the Columbia Health Service Fee (mandatory for full-time students) may receive the varicella vaccine on campus at no charge ? see Columbia Health (Morningside) [5] or the Student Health Service [6] (CUMC) [6] for more information. This is especially important for adults at high risk of exposure, including teachers, childcare providers, healthcare workers, travelers, and anyone else who is frequently around children or has a weak immune system. The highly effective vaccine is administered in two doses, which are one to two months apart.

Get better soon!

Alice!

Category:
General Health [7]
Aches, Pains & Other Ailments [8]
Skin Conditions [9]

Related questions

Shingles [10]
Reye’s syndrome [11]
When are colds contagious? [12]
What is a staph infection? [13]
Can you get staph from being around someone with it? [14]

Published date:
Sep 13, 2013
Last reviewed on:
Mar 14, 2014

Footer menu

- Contact Alice!
  - Content Use
  - Media Inquiries
  - Comments & Corrections
Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.

If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

Source URL: http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/chickenpox-%E2%80%94-do-i-need-stay-home-class#comment-0

Links