

Information resources for families

Contact with chickenpox or measles

During and after cancer treatment

Treatment for cancer reduces how well the immune system works. Your child may be more likely to catch infections such as chickenpox (varicella) or measles during cancer treatment and for at least six months after treatment (longer if they have had a stem cell transplant).

Offer a balanced diet

The best protection from these infections is to avoid being exposed. Ask your family or friends (including the parents of children your child plays with) to tell you if they have been recently exposed to chickenpox or measles. If your child is at school/childcare, you can ask your oncologist for a letter to explain the importance of you being told if children at the school/childcare have an infectious condition.

Another important way to protect your child is to make sure that all members of the family and people living in the house are fully vaccinated according to current recommendations. It is safe and strongly recommended for other children in the house to have their routine immunisations including:

- measles, mumps, rubella (MMR)
- measles, mumps, rubella, varicella (MMR-V)
- varicella (chickenpox)
- rotavirus (given to infants under six months).

The chickenpox and measles vaccines are not recommended for children with cancer during treatment and for at least six months after treatment and longer if your child has had a transplant.

Important information about chickenpox

Chickenpox is a common childhood infection caused by the varicella virus. It can cause more severe illness in children with cancer who have a reduced immune system because of chemotherapy. Fever and a spotty and itchy rash are the most common signs of chickenpox.

How is chickenpox spread?

The chickenpox virus is very contagious. It is spread when a person swallows or breathes in the cough or sneeze droplets of an infected person or touches contaminated surfaces or objects and then touches their own mouth or nose. Direct contact with the rash can also cause an infection.

If someone has been exposed to chickenpox, they may not develop the infection until 10–21 days after the contact. Chickenpox is contagious from two days (48 hours) before the spots appear until all the spots have crusted over (or become scabs). Your child will be at risk of developing chickenpox if they have been exposed to someone with chickenpox during the contagious period.

What do I do if my child has been exposed to chickenpox?

- If your child has been exposed to chickenpox it is important that you contact the hospital as soon as possible. There are some preventive measures that can be taken to prevent your child becoming unwell. This includes an injection of zoster immunoglobulin (ZIG), which works best when given as soon as possible after exposure (within 96 hours), but can be given up to 10 days after exposure.
- If your child is unwell or you are concerned that they may have chickenpox please contact your hospital as soon as possible to be assessed by a medical officer.

Important information about measles

Measles is an infection caused by a virus. It can cause more severe illness in children with cancer who have a reduced immune system because of chemotherapy. Even though a measles vaccine has been available in Australia for many years, cases of confirmed measles still occur. Fever, cough, runny nose, red eyes and a red and blotchy skin rash are the most common signs of measles.

How is measles spread?

The measles virus is highly contagious. It is spread when a person swallows or breathes in the cough or sneeze droplets of an infected person or touches contaminated surfaces or objects and then touches their own mouth or nose. The measles virus particles can remain in the air (environment) for up to two hours.

If someone has been exposed to measles they may not develop the infection until 10–14 days later. Measles is contagious from when the person begins to be unwell with a fever, cough and runny nose. This is usually two to four days before the rash appears, until four days after the rash appears. Your child will be at risk of developing measles if they have had any contact (including being in the same room) with someone who has measles during their contagious period.

What do I do if my child has been exposed to measles?

- If your child has been exposed to measles it is important that you contact the hospital as soon as possible. An injection of immunoglobulin is available to prevent your child becoming unwell. This must be given within 72 hours (three days) of exposure.
- If your child is unwell or you are concerned that they may have measles please contact your hospital as soon as possible to be assessed by a medical officer.

Who to contact for further questions

Talk to your oncologist or nurse if you have any questions about chickenpox or measles.

Hospital phone number:

Disclaimer: This information is for educational purposes only and should not be seen as a substitute for advice from your doctor or other professional healthcare providers. If you have specific questions about the content of this information, or any other medical matter, it is recommended that you consult your doctor or other professional healthcare provider. This information is considered to be true and correct at the date of publication, however changes in circumstances after the time of publication may impact on the accuracy of this information.