



Alert: Chickenpox Outbreak in children in South Hedland

October 14th 2020

There have been **nine confirmed cases of chickenpox in Hedland in the** past 6 weeks. Average age is 6 years old. Chickenpox causes a fever, a runny nose, sneezing and cough, and an itchy rash, which can be widespread over the trunk, face, scalp, armpits, and limbs. It can be more severe where the skin is already inflamed e.g. with sunburn or other skin inflammation. The infection is passed from one person to another by coughing or sneezing or touching another person's infected skin or surfaces they have touched/coughed onto. There is a **long incubation period of 1-3 weeks** to develop the disease after being exposed to an infectious case.

The rash is initially small red raised spots, then develops into small blisters, then pustules, and then scabs, dries and heals. The infection is usually mild in children **but can be more severe in unimmunized infants, unimmunized adults, pregnant women with no immunity, or those who are immunosuppressed.** The rash has new lesions occurring over several days so that **overall it can last 7 to 10 days.** It can also affect the eye, inside the mouth and the respiratory tract. If any of these vulnerable people have been in schools or daycare with cases they should ideally stay at home to avoid contact until no further cases present.

A virus called **Varicella Zoster** causes chickenpox. The WA childhood vaccination program immunize children against chickenpox at 18 months of age. **Chickenpox can occur again in those who have had it previously, or in those who have been immunised, as immunity does wane over time.** However those who have had it before, or been immunized, usually have a milder and shorter illness.

If a parent/guardian notices a fever, runny nose, or cough, or a rash in their child, then they should keep them out of school or daycare. Chicken pox is most infectious in the two days before the rash and the 5 days after the rash. Other children in the household must be kept at home if early symptoms develop.

Please take your child to a General Practitioner for testing. (Please warn the GP surgery ahead of time so they know to remove your child from the waiting room quickly) Tests involve a swab from the throat and sometimes a swab from a skin spot. In children there is no need for a blood test. Testing is important so an outbreak of chicken pox can be identified quickly. There may be other cases that have not been tested.

Children with any symptoms will need to be kept at home away from other people until they get the test results. If tests are negative they can return to school when feeling better. If the tests are positive they need to **stay home until ALL the skin lesions have dried and crusted and the skin is healed.** Please ring me or the school nurse 9174 1321 if you have any queries. A link to a fact sheet from the Department of Health on the signs and symptoms of chickenpox is below.

http://www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/Healthy-WA/Articles/A_E/Chickenpox-varicella

Yours sincerely,
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