

Chickenpox Policy for Schools

Schools and childcare facilities are the most common sites for chickenpox outbreaks. Studies have demonstrated that outbreaks in the school setting can persist for up to 6 months. In an effort to reduce exposure among children in schools or childcare facilities, public health in Utah has recently clarified the policy for dealing with chickenpox within the school setting.

Chickenpox Cases

Persons with symptoms should be excluded from school/childcare until all lesions have scabbed over (usually about 5 days after rash onset). A doctor's diagnosis or laboratory testing is not necessary for exclusion. If chickenpox is suspected, the person should be excluded from the school setting.

Chickenpox is a reportable disease in Utah. Therefore, all suspected case should be reported to the local health department. The case report form is attached and is also available on the Utah Department of Health's website.

Outbreak Definition

A chickenpox outbreak in a school setting is defined as:

- 5 or more cases within a 2-month period in the same school facility

An outbreak is considered over when no new cases occur within 2 months from the date the last case was considered infectious.

Note: Because daycares, after school programs, preschools, Head Start programs, charter schools, and private schools can differ significantly from traditional public school settings, the local health officer in each local health department may make adjustments to the outbreak definition for settings where it is deemed necessary.

An Outbreak Response

Once an outbreak is confirmed, parents should be notified of their child's possible exposure to chickenpox. They should be educated on the signs and symptoms of the disease, the availability of a second dose of vaccine, told to keep children home if they suspect they are ill, and to inform the school if their child has chickenpox. Children with signs and symptoms should be sent home and encouraged to consult a medical professional. A sample letter for parents is available on the Utah Department of Health's website.

Because chickenpox infection is particularly dangerous in adults and pregnant women, teachers and employees should also be notified of the outbreak and educated on the signs and symptoms of chickenpox. A fact sheet on chickenpox is available on the Utah Department of Health's website. Your local health department should be contacted and notified once 5 cases are identified within your school.

Exclusions

Exclusions of vaccine-exempt students should occur once at least 5 cases have occurred within a 2-month period among students in the same kindergarten class or grade level. Exclusions should only be made to students within the same kindergarten class or grade level. Vaccine-exempt students should remain out of school for days 10-21 after the last known case is considered non-infectious. Days 10-21 are the critical days for vaccine-exempt students to be out of school, however, local health departments may choose to exclude

students for the full 21 days after exposure to simplify the exclusion policy. It is recommended that you contact your local health department if you need help determining who and when someone should be excluded.

Vaccination within 3 days, and possibly 5 days, of exposure has been shown to prevent or reduce the severity of disease. However, since an adequate immune response can take up to 2 weeks to develop, disease may still result even if vaccination occurs soon after exposure. Parents should still be cautioned to watch for signs of illness even if their child receives the vaccine within 5 days of exposure, and should keep the child home if they suspect their child is ill. If parents of vaccine-exempt students choose to vaccinate their children, the exclusionary period does not apply and students may return to school as soon as they are vaccinated.

The local health officer in each local health department may evaluate individual cases and outbreaks to make any necessary adjustments to exemptions.

For the 2006-2007 school year in Utah, all students in kindergarten through 4th grade as well as 7th graders are required to be vaccinated for chickenpox. Exclusions do not apply to students without a vaccination requirement, although any sick child, regardless of vaccination requirement, should be excluded until all lesions have scabbed.

For the 2007-2008 school year in Utah, all students in kindergarten through 5th grade as well as 7th and 8th graders are required to be vaccinated for chickenpox. Exclusions do not apply to students without a vaccination requirement, although any sick child, regardless of vaccination requirement, should be excluded until all lesions have scabbed.

Vaccination

Because chickenpox infection can still result after one dose of the chickenpox vaccine, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices now recommends that all persons should routinely be given two doses of the chickenpox vaccine. A second dose catch-up chickenpox vaccination is recommended for children and adolescents who previously had received one dose. Although two doses of chickenpox vaccine are not currently required for school entry, it is strongly recommended that all persons receive two doses to provide better protection against the disease and to prevent future outbreaks in the school setting.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact your local health department or the Utah Department of Health. Case investigation forms can be mailed or faxed to your local health department or the Utah Department of Health. Additional resources are available on the Utah Department of Health's website: http://health.utah.gov/epi/fact_sheets/dzatoz.htm.

Utah Department of Health
Phone (801) 538-6191
Fax (801) 538-9923
<http://health.utah.gov/epi/>