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 percent 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,

It's no secret that dealing with chickenpox can be a real bummer, especially when you're unable to press the pause button on your busy schedule while you recuperate. Although you're no doubt itching to get back to normalcy, it's best for your health and the health of others that you stay home and don’t 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). Staying home not only helps you to rest and heal, but it prevents those who may not be immune from being exposed and getting sick, as even people who have been vaccinated can spread it and contract it (though generally a milder version). Because the virus is spread so easily, it’s advised that people affected by chickenpox steer clear of contact with others until the lesions have dried and crusted over into scabs. Read on for more information about symptoms and treatment.

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 ten 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, the rash generally isn't contagious and you can resume usual activity.

The best way to accelerate the healing process is to avoid scratching. Although it’s tempting, scratching can slow healing and lead to infection, prolonging your recovery. You could try dabbing calamine lotion on itchy spots, and avoid popping fluid-filled blisters. Adults can also experience temporarily relief from itching through the use of an oral or topical antihistamine, such
as diphenhydramine. 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 may help.

While you heal, it’s best to get lots of rest and avoid contact with others. Your friends, family, or roommates might consider contacting their health care providers about vaccination [2] if they haven’t already had the chickenpox. This is critical for adults at high risk of exposure, including teachers, childcare providers, health care workers, travelers, and anyone else who is frequently around children or has a compromised immune system. The highly effective vaccine is administered in two doses, which are given one to two months apart.

Reader, if you’re concerned about staying on top of your studies, you may be able to use this personal time to catch up on reading and homework. Contacting your professors and academic advisors to set make-up plans if you’re going to miss any school work will also help. If you haven’t already contacted your health care provider, it’s a good idea to schedule an appointment as soon as possible for proper diagnosis and treatment recommendations. Although most cases of chickenpox don’t require medical treatment, your provider will assess whether you fall into a high-risk group [3] — people who are more likely to experience various complications. If it's appropriate, they may even decide to prescribe creams or oral medications (though this is rare). At the end of the day, taking the time to rest and recuperate outside of the classroom is key to prioritizing your health and the health of others.

Get better soon!

Alice!

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