Outbreak of Varicella (Chickenpox) 
In Santa Barbara County

The Public Health Department has confirmed 5 cases of chickenpox and 1 case of shingles associated with a local school in the county. The majority of confirmed cases were in children who were not vaccinated. Chickenpox and shingles are both caused by the varicella-zoster virus. Due to the nature of the disease and potential risks, people who are immunocompromised or pregnant and who are also unimmunized are being informed so they may take action to protect their health.

Chickenpox spreads easily from infected people to others who have never had chickenpox or received the chickenpox vaccine. Chickenpox spreads in the air through coughing or sneezing. It can also be spread by touching or breathing in the virus particles that come from chickenpox blisters.

Like other vaccine preventable diseases, the best way to prevent chickenpox is to get the chickenpox vaccine. Some people who have been vaccinated against chickenpox can still get the disease. However, the symptoms are usually milder with fewer blisters and mild or no fever. About 25% to 30% of vaccinated people who get chickenpox will develop illness as serious as chickenpox in unvaccinated persons. Before the vaccine, about 4 million people would get chickenpox every year in the United States with thousands of serious complications. Data now demonstrates that use of the varicella vaccine prevents on average 3.5 million cases of varicella, 9000 hospitalizations and 100 deaths each year in the US.

Chickenpox most commonly causes an illness that lasts about 5-10 days. The classic symptom of chickenpox is a rash that turns into itchy, fluid-filled blisters that eventually turn into scabs. The rash may first show up on the face, chest, and back then spread to the rest of the body, including inside the mouth, eyelids, or genital area. It usually takes about one week for all the blisters to become scabs.

Some people with serious complications from chickenpox can become so sick that they need to be hospitalized. Chickenpox can also cause death.

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