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## Maine Health Alert Network (HAN) System

### PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY

**To:** Health Care Providers  
**From:** Sara Robinson, Infectious Disease Epidemiology Program  
**Subject:** **Cases of Varicella (Chickenpox) Associated with the Portland Expo Center**  
**Date / Time:** Saturday, August 3, 2019 at 9:30am  
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**Abstract:** Maine CDC is aware of cases of varicella (chickenpox) in individuals who are staying at the Portland Expo Center. Varicella is a contagious viral disease that can spread easily to individuals who have not had varicella and have not gotten the varicella vaccine. There are several diseases that can cause a febrile rash in children, so Maine CDC encourages laboratory testing when assessing patients when possible. If diagnosed with varicella, patients may return to their congregate living setting if clinically stable and indicated by a provider. Individuals staying at the Portland Expo are already considered exposed. Providers should encourage patients to practice good hand and respiratory hygiene and stay away from non-immune individuals as much as possible.

# Cases of Varicella (Chickenpox) Associated with the Portland Expo Center

## Summary:

Maine CDC is aware of cases of varicella (chickenpox) in individuals who are staying at the Portland Expo Center. Varicella is a contagious viral disease that can spread easily to individuals who have not had varicella and have not gotten the varicella vaccine. There are several diseases that can cause a febrile rash in children, so Maine CDC encourages laboratory testing when assessing patients when possible. If diagnosed with varicella, patients may return to their congregate living setting if clinically stable and indicated by a provider. Individuals staying at the Portland Expo are already considered exposed. Providers should encourage patients to practice good hand and respiratory hygiene and stay away from non-immune individuals as much as possible.

## Background:

Varicella (chickenpox) is a highly contagious viral disease. It is caused by the varicella zoster virus. Varicella is usually mild, but it can be serious in infants under 12 months of age, adolescents, adults, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems. Varicella causes an itchy rash that usually lasts about a week. It can also cause fever, tiredness, loss of appetite and or headache. Varicella can spread easily from an infected person to anyone who has not had varicella and has not gotten the varicella vaccine(s).

Varicella in vaccinated children can be mild and sometimes difficult to confirm by clinical assessment only. Since diagnosis of varicella has public health implications, it's recommended that clinicians use PCR testing to assist in the diagnosis of varicella. PCR testing is 95%–100% sensitive for macular and/or papular lesions.

## Recommendations:

### 1. Consider varicella when evaluating rash illness

Consider varicella as a diagnosis for anyone with clinically compatible illness, regardless of vaccination history. The classic rash:

- is generalized and pruritic (itchy)
- progresses rapidly from macules to papules to vesicular lesions before crusting
- usually appears first on the head, chest, and back then spreads to the rest of the body
- lesions are usually concentrated on the chest and back

Breakthrough varicella has been reported in both one- and two-dose vaccine recipients and is less severe than varicella in unvaccinated individuals:

- the number of skin lesions is commonly less than 50
- vesicular lesions are less common
- lesions are most often papules that do not progress to vesicles
- varicella in vaccinated persons is typically shorter in duration and has a lower incidence of fever than in unvaccinated persons

### 2. Test for varicella to confirm diagnosis

For both unvaccinated and vaccinated persons, polymerase chain reaction (PCR) of skin lesions (vesicles, scabs, maculopapular lesions) is the preferred and most reliable method for confirming

infection. PCR testing can be performed at commercial laboratories and at Maine's Health and Environmental Testing Laboratory (HETL). Testing at HETL is preferred because turnaround time is faster.

- **Specimen collection:** A sterile needle should be used to gently unroof the top of the vesicle. A sterile swab is then used to vigorously swab the base of the lesion and collect vesicular fluid. Use swabs made from synthetic fibers and do not use swabs with a wooden stick. Place swabs directly into empty tubes. For additional information on specimen collection, see: [www.cdc.gov/chickenpox/hcp/lab-tests.html](http://www.cdc.gov/chickenpox/hcp/lab-tests.html).

### **3. Check vaccination status and encourage vaccination**

Encourage varicella vaccination for anyone without evidence of immunity who does not have medical contraindications.

- For routine vaccination, two doses of varicella vaccine should be given to children, the first dose at 12-15 months and the second dose at 4-6 years.
- For catch up vaccination children between 7-18 years without evidence of immunity should receive two doses of varicella vaccine.
- The recommended minimum interval between doses is 3 months for children ages 7 through 12 years and 4 weeks for persons age 13 years and older.

### **4. Help stop transmission by encouraging those who have illness to stay home**

- Tell patients with suspected varicella to stay at home and avoid close contact with others until all lesions have crusted over (usually 5 days) or, in immunized people without crusts, until no new lesions appear within a 24-hour period.
- In congregate living settings patients with varicella may be sent back to that setting. Providers should encourage patients to practice good hand hygiene and stay away from non-immune individuals as much as possible.

### **5. Promptly Report Cases of Varicella**

- Varicella is a reportable disease and all cases should be promptly reported. Disease reports can be made by phone or fax 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Phone: 1-800-821-5821 Fax: 1-800-293-7534.
- The notifiable conditions reporting form and list of notifiable conditions can be found at <http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/infectious-disease/epi/disease-reporting/>

#### **Useful Resources:**

- Maine CDC website <http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/varicella>
- Federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <https://www.cdc.gov/chickenpox/index.html>
- For information about varicella vaccine or vaccine schedules, please contact the Maine Immunization Program at [www.immunizeme.org](http://www.immunizeme.org) or by calling 1-800-867-4775.

Maine CDC epidemiologists are available to answer any questions about varicella through the 24/7 disease reporting line at 1-800-821-5821.