

hand hygiene

# Highly Contagious But Not Deadly

BY HEATHER SAUNDERS, MPH, RN, CIC

Let's play a game of hide-and-seek: I'll hide in your nervous system, in your dorsal root ganglia, and you can try to find me. But beware—I am rather skilled at this game. It might be years or even decades before I reappear, being suddenly reactivated in particularly uncomfortable ways. I might even stay in hiding for your entire life and never appear, for which you will likely be thankful. I am 1 of 9 human herpesviruses and cause 2 different diseases. Suppose I'm able to cause the first of 2 infections successfully: In that case I'll stay dormant in your body until later in life, when I may reactivate, resulting in a different infectious disease.

I bring about a highly contagious infectious disease that commonly appears first in childhood. Before they invented the vaccination against me, I would infect approximately 3.5 million individuals annually. My first disease is recorded in early medical literature, with ancient civilizations documenting the severe itching rash and pimple-like bumps I cause. In 1888, a physician named James von Bokay observed a connection between my first and second disease when he noticed that children exposed to persons with the second disease became ill with the first one. Later, in 1954, Thomas Weller isolated me from the fluid-filled blisters present in persons with 1 of my 2 diseases and confirmed me as the agent of both.



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[InfectionControlToday.com/  
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Initially, you can acquire me by exposure to someone infected with me through direct contact or by inhaling aerosolized particles from the fluid in the skin lesions I cause. Once you are infected, it takes me around 10 to 21 days to cause my primary disease with the onset of symptoms. One to 2 days before the onset of a rash, you may have a fever and general tiredness. But in children, the first sign of the disease is an itchy, pimple-like rash that first appears on their face, chest, and back but can spread across the entire body. Symptoms of the disease, including the rash, generally last 4 to 7 days. After infection, I can stay dormant in your nervous system for decades before possible reactivation, thought to be triggered by a weakened immune system, including lowered immunity due to stress. Once reawakened, I travel up from the nerve root and cause a second disease. This one results in a painful, itching or tingling blistery rash. Most

commonly, the rash appears as a stripe on the left or right side of the body, but occasionally it also appears on the face or other areas of the body. Other symptoms include fever, chills, and headache. The blisters of the rash will scab over in 7 to 10 days, completely disappearing about 2 to 4 weeks after initial onset.

Between the 2 diseases, I am now only responsible for fewer than 130 deaths annually in the United States. Thankfully for you, since the development of the vaccine for the first disease in 1995, reported cases have significantly dropped for both diseases. Treatment of the second disease depends on the age of onset, complications, and immune state. If the patient is high risk, they may be treated with antivirals or immune globulin to lessen the duration and severity of the disease.

*I am Varicella Zoster Virus!* □

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