

CHICKEN *of* POX

BY ANN RHODES

“Your child has been exposed to Chicken Pox,” they said.

“Oh, no,” I thought. Maybe if I remove him from daycare right now, he won’t get them.

That was my first reaction. However, I was aware that chicken pox got worse the older you got it. So, after years of my son’s, and then my daughter’s frequent exposures at daycare, with no pox ever developing, I started to hope for the time when they would actually come down with the disease.

I looked forward to it, even. I wished for it. I wondered about every pink mark and rash. But they remained varicella-free.

Until their two year old brother, while leaving for a trip out of the country, after having packed the bags and loaded them in the truck, strolled out with the tell-tale small pink marks clustered mainly on his trunk. Within hours they had turned to tiny blisters that looked like drops of water resting on the skin. Some were tiny like a pin head. Most were closer to the size of a pencil eraser. They migrated from his chest and back up his neck and throughout his scalp, then down his forehead to his eyebrows. After four days, they had stopped reproducing and had all turned into crusty scabs in various sizes. Two weeks later, the bloody scabs were still falling out of his hair.

Surely this would be exposure his older siblings couldn’t escape. I watched them. I looked at their bodies. I waited. My daughter broke out at a little league baseball game exactly 14 days later with 20 spots on her upper chest and back. She came home and headed for bed with chills and a low grade fever.

By the next morning there were hundreds on her chest and back. They were creeping down her arms and up her neck. They were heading into her underpants. I only left her once to pick up her older brother at school who was suffering with a 102 degree fever. And, at closer inspection, 5 or 6 blistering pox.

Both children spent most of the day sleeping. It was the next morning when the itching began. My son had developed several hundred more pox on his chest and even more on his back. His fever was persistent. And he itched. He itched so bad he cried. He took constant baths, either with soda or an oat-

meal base, and benadryl and aspirin. After one such bath, I came in and he was huddled down next to the bathtub as though he no longer had the strength to stand up. He looked up at me sorrowfully and said he was counting them. This was my mathematical son. When I had provided him with his first set of crayons, he counted them. I had to show him that they were drawing tools. Still, as I looked at the thousands of pox on his chest, I wondered how he would be able to count the ones on his back or even count that high. And he interrupted my thoughts, adding, “...there are forty five.” I glanced at the thousands on his chest “...on my penis”

You felt real sorry for him until you saw my daughter. Her pox had attacked her face and scalp. They covered her arms and legs. You could even find them on the palms of her hands. She resembled one of those worst-case-acne photos with large red oozing sores covering where her skin should have been. Her face was swollen, it had so many pox on it. They were right next to her eyes, touching the whites, they ran down her ear canals, and down her throat. She had pain when she swallowed and her eyes were bloodshot. This girl who rarely had a fever and never over 101 was running a steady 103 degree temperature. Her pox didn’t itch, they hurt. I thought of all the people who had sick children with far more serious, though not much uglier, ailments. I thought about how helpless their parents felt. And reminded myself chicken pox had a course it ran, and then it they got better.

And in about a week, it had. The pox took longer to fade and some scarred, but by summer, you couldn’t tell what they had gone through.

I was lucky. As it turns out thousands of kids are hospitalized each year from complications from Chicken Pox. Hundreds actually die. That summer, a vaccination came out against the disease.



Daughter Jesse with chicken pox, May, 1993.