

## Sawbones 162: Chicken Pox

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**Clint:** Sawbones is a show about medical history, and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour and not try to diagnose your mystery boil? We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth. You're worth it.

[theme music plays]

**Justin:**

Hello everybody, and welcome to Sawbones, a Marital Tour of Misguided Medicine. I'm your cohost, Justin McElroy.

**Sydnee:**

And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

**Justin:**

I hit all my consonants really well in that intro, Sydnee. I just wanted you to know I really put the effort in.

**Sydnee:**

You know, you come from a proud tradition of, uh, radio, radio voices, so I, I expect nothing less from you.

**Justin:**

Finally, I've come into my own. Sydnee, this is an exciting episode—

**Sydnee:**

Is it?

**Justin:**

... for, for a change. Yes. This is.

**Sydnee:**

I would think it's interesting to see what, what my lovely non-medical husband finds interesting—

**Justin:**

Non-medical is kind of harsh.

**Sydnee:**

... because you know, in the... In the medical world, I think, our definition of interesting sometimes is—

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

... well, it's different and it's also unpleasant.

**Justin:**

Sydnee literally just, uh, started an anecdote with, "You're not going to think this is funny. You won't get this," and then trucked right on through that bad boy.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

All three luscious minutes.

**Sydnee:**

It's such a... It was such a funny doctor... It... I'm not going to even get into it, 'cause...

**Justin:**

Well, we'll... We'll test it with the audience. It'll be a special bonus deleted scene.

**Sydnee:**

Do you... Should I?

**Justin:**

No. No. No.

**Sydnee:**

Okay.

**Justin:**

Any episode could be somebody's first episode, and I can't have that on our program. This is... this is an exciting episode because we're going to... This is a historic generation because of this topic.

**Sydnee:**

I think that... I guess that's true, in a way.

**Justin:**

Yeah. It is. We, We're talking about chicken pox.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah.

**Justin:**

And the reason I... I was excited about it, I asked people for their stories about it, because it occurred to me that, like, our generation is really the last generation for whom... I mean, obviously, chicken pox won't be, like, annihilated, but, like, for whom chicken pox will be like an everyday sort of rite of passage.

**Sydnee:**

I also like the word 'annihilated' used for, for a, for a virus, there.

**Justin:**

You don't think it's accurate?

**Sydnee:**

We'll annihilate the virus.

**Justin:**

With extreme prejudice?

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] You know, it's interesting you say that, and you're right that, uh, I think, our generation was the last one that you just expected that everybody was going to get it.

**Justin:**

Yeah. Everybody had it.

**Sydnee:**

Um, as, as a physician, I have already missed... I am the, the last generation of physicians who routinely saw chicken pox are, are older than me.

**Justin:**

True that.

**Sydnee:**

I missed that.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. I have, uh, seen I think, one case of chicken—other than like, my own—

**Justin:**

So wild. That's so weird.

**Sydnee:**

... one case of chicken pox in my career. Yeah. And we just don't... I mean it's... Yeah. Different landscape.

**Justin:**

So, we've got some—

**Sydnee:**

Thank you to everybody who recommended this topic, by the way—

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

... including Joanne, and Ann, and Alyssa, and Gabriel, and Melinda, and Amanda, and Carson, and Kurt. And to everyone who sent us stories about chicken pox.

**Justin:**

Yeah. Kind of a departure for us, but I figure this episode is a historic... This is our like, time capsule episode. In a hundred years, people can come back

and listen to this one if they wanted to know what life was like for the chicken pox generation.

**Sydnee:**

With chicken pox.

**Justin:**

Um, so let's get into it, Syd.

**Sydnee:**

So first of all, uh, most older people are going to know this already, but for some of, some of the... those of you who are younger, you may not. Uh, chicken pox is a viral illness. It's caused by varicella zoster, is the, the virus, and it mainly affects children, at least it used to. It mainly affects no one these days.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

But, but typically, it affected children. Uh, if you got chicken pox, which I did, which Justin did—

**Justin:**

Sure did.

**Sydnee:**

... a lot of us in, in our age group did, uh, you would get an itchy red rash. It spreads from your head down. That's always really important. I know I say that, and people think, "Why, why does it matter how it's spread?" It helps us distinguish what rash it might be.

**Justin:**

Depending on where it's... the location is.

**Sydnee:**

Mm-hmm. Depending on where it starts and where it goes to.

**Justin:**

Hmm.

**Sydnee:**

So from head down, center out, that kind of thing. Uh, and we describe the rash, the, the blisters you get, as a dew-drop on a rose petal.

**Justin:**

That's ludicrous. That has nothing to do with chicken pox.

**Sydnee:**

Isn't that poetic?

**Justin:**

Yeah. I mean, why?

**Sydnee:**

Dew-drop on a rose... Have you ever seen... Look. You need to look at a picture of a chicken pox... chicken pox blister, the vesicle.

**Justin:**

Nah. You know what? I'm actually super good.

**Sydnee:**

No. It's not that bad. It looks like a dew-drop on a rose petal.

**Justin:**

[inaudible 00:04:55] Let's envision that.

**Sydnee:**

A fluid-filled tiny... It's lovely. Anyway. You can get fever. You get, you know, you feel yucky, you feel malaise, you feel tired. Um, It's very contagious, so typically, when somebody in a household would get chicken pox, 90% of household contacts who aren't immune already, are also going to get chicken pox. It's crazy contagious.

It's spread by respiratory d— droplets, as well the fluid from the blisters, themselves, um, and it is contagious until it crusts. And so until all those little blisters become little crusts, what we would probably call scabs, at that point, it's no longer contagious. But until then, it is.

Um, it's much worse in certain populations, people who are under one, or over 15, people with maybe issues with their immune system, pregnant, pregnant people, it's definitely worse for pregnant patients, uh, which is part of why it was so important for us to try to stop it.

Uh, you can get some severe complications, um, things like pneumonia, neurological complications, but those were fairly rare.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Um, Most people recover really well, uh, in, you know, a week, 10 days, with just supportive care and trying not to scratch.

**Justin:**

Um, how about chicken pox story?

**Sydnee:**

Let's hear a chicken pox story.

**Justin:**

Uh, this one comes to us from Amy. You said, Uh, "I saw your tweet about chicken pox stories, and wanted to contribute. I got chicken pox on a family trip when I was four years old, except the trip wasn't just with my family. It was also with some family friends, one of whom happened to be my dad's boss. I ended up giving chicken pox to my dad, and also his boss."

**Sydnee:**

Ooh.

**Justin:**

"I'm 27 years old now, and my dad still has the same boss. I'd like to hope he's forgiven me."

**Sydnee:**

That's rough.

**Justin:**

Yeah. That's rough. Chicken pox to your dad.

**Sydnee:**

That is. That's also rough because your dad and your dad's boss had a rougher... probably had a rougher go of it.

**Justin:**

Yeah. We've got some of their stories about, about that coming up a little later.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, descriptions of a disease that was probably chicken pox date back a super long time, ancient Babylonian texts, 2,000 years ago. But it's really difficult as we look back through some of these ancient texts, to tell if they're talking about chicken pox, smallpox, syphilis, uh, shingles, herpes... Anything where there are spots on you, it gets a little... It gets a little blurry. Uh, it's really hard to distinguish what disease they may have been writing about.

**Justin:**

I mean, this is like, a broad family of diseases, or is it just...

**Sydnee:**

Not everything I just named, but some of them, yes.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Some of them are very closely related. We'll get to that. But, uh, no. I mean, like, smallpox and chicken pox are definitely not... They're definitely not the same thing. They're very different, like, viral processes, and in... in the... to the extent that you know, if you got smallpox, you were very worried that you would die, and most of the time with chicken pox, you don't.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

So, um, but, but at first, the rash, if you're not that familiar, might look similar.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Um, they really don't, but in ancient texts, who knows?



**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, in, uh... There's an ancient Ayurvedic text that describes what probably is chicken pox, and advises... And especially, you think it's chicken pox, too, because of the, the things that they advise to treat it are fairly benign. Um, you know, you save your... When you look to ancient texts, if you see like, a lot of bloodletting, it's probably something worse. If you tell 'em... If they're telling them to do something like rub some neem leaves and turmeric on it, it's a little, you know, less severe.

**Justin:**

Idea being that, if it... the, the lengths they would go to to try to cure it are lessened, because—

**Sydnee:**

Exactly.

**Justin:**

... everything was whack.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. So, so something that people would look at and go, "Ooh. That, that's what we would call smallpox today," may be treated more aggressively. Um, in addition, there were certain... You read these, like, very specific guidelines, like, uh, keep a glass of water near the head of the bed, spread neem leaves, this just, this certain plant, neem, leaves around the house, tie them above the door frame, avoid baths, don't eat any fatty food. This actually probably makes sense, scientifically.

**Justin:**

Why?

**Sydnee:**

I know this is weird, but neem leaves do have some, um, antimicrobial kind of properties, so like, if you were worried about secondary bacterial infections, so like your sores opening up and getting bacteria in them, that's not a crazy thought. It's not going to fix chicken pox, but you know, it's not a crazy thought. If you had a bundle of those tied above the door frame to your house, it was a sign to people not to come in, which is really smart with chicken pox—

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

... because it's so contagious. Um, keeping a glass of water near the bed kept you from getting up out of bed, because you just drank that water, so you didn't spread chicken pox as much.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

If you took too any baths and, and rubbed your skin too briskly, you would leave yourself open to infection, so that wasn't a great idea back in the day. And also, fatty food is a little more taxing on the digestive system, so it was a way of saying like, "Give your body a rest, because it's fighting off an illness." These aren't crazy thoughts, especially for something that mainly requires supportive care.

**Justin:**

Thank you. So the Ayurvedics were on the money on this one.

**Sydnee:**

This, This was... These were not bad suggestions. These weren't going to hurt anybody.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Um, similarly, you know, the Egyptians recommended oatmeal baths.

**Justin:**

Wow. That's pretty advanced.

**Sydnee:**

That one stuck around to now.

**Justin:**

To now.

**Sydnee:**

People still do that.

**Justin:**

All right. I want to give that one a certified gold star.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah.

**Justin:**

Good job, everybody.

**Sydnee:**

There you go. Um, in the—

**Justin:**

Although, can... I do want to be... I do want to hang out with the dude who was first like, "Excuse me. I've got an idea."

"Yes, weird Gerald. What is it?"

"I know this is going to sound weird, and everyone's always saying how weird, uh, my ideas are, but listen. Hear me out. Oatmeal bath."

"Okay. Can someone help him out, please?"

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

"Wait. Oh no. I'm going to... I'm crushing it."

**Sydnee:**

"I love how squishy it feels between my toes."

**Justin:**

"It's so squishy." He was the great, great, great, great grandfather of the lady in Patch Adams who wanted to swim in the bowlful of noodles.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

They were ancestors.

**Sydnee:**

They tried that, actually, a bowlful of noodles, and it... It just wasn't as effective for chicken pox.

**Justin:**

Yeah. "My chicken pox still sucks. I hate this."

**Sydnee:**

I think, uh, in the early 900s, Rossi was able to write descriptions of chicken pox that pretty clearly distinguished it from measles and smallpox, so we had kind of like, these are distinct diseases.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Um, we saw Giovanni Filippo write the first really well-documented case description, which is in the 1500s, which is interesting because there's like this footnote as I'm reading about him, like that he really hated doing this, because he had this thing about people that he thought maybe were dirty. He was also kind of like this socio-economic elitist, where he didn't like to be around people of lower socio-economic classes, and so, like, he was real grossed out by the whole thing, but he wrote a really good description of it.

**Justin:**

[laughs]

**Sydnee:**

Just on a side note.

**Justin:**

That's inspiring.

**Sydnee:**

Um, as we often do in medicine, there was like, this period where Dr. Richard Morton argued that it was just a milder form of smallpox in the 1600s, even though we already knew it wasn't, and set us back for a while.

**Justin:**

He decided to take a swing at it.

**Sydnee:**

Until in 1767, when William Heberden proved that it was a different disease, as well as the fact that you remained immune, more than likely, after you had it once.

**Justin:**

Oh.

**Sydnee:**

So we figured that out all the way back then, that if you had chicken pox once, you probably weren't going to get it again.

**Justin:**

Now, we say, "Probably." Here's a story from Chelsea. Um, she says, uh, "Per my mother, who I have to believe because I was too young to remember, I got the chicken pox for the first time when I was two. I contracted it from my Uncle Ronald, who had shingles, and it was apparently pretty mild. It's always—"

**Sydnee:**

Uncle Ron.

**Justin:**

It's always an Uncle Ronald.

**Sydnee:**

Come on, Uncle Ron.

**Justin:**

Uh, I... Please. He prefers Ronald.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

I do remember the set... "Oh, you can just call me Uncle Ronald."

"Hi Uncle Jerry."

"It's Jeremiah."

Uh, "I do remember the second time I had chicken pox at 15, which was terrible. It started as a mild rash, which I thought was a grass allergy. I took

a Benadryl, and went to bed. In the morning, I was covered in pox, and my mom took me to the doctor. The doctor had to pull... pull out a, um, huge... " I... It is a, a A-word that we can't say on our show.

**Sydnee:**

A huge butt.

**Justin:**

"... a huge butt book of pictures, and disgusting rashes to confirm that it was chicken pox. They said that they hadn't seen a case in over 10 years, because, well, vaccines. I missed two weeks of school, and came back to a rumor that I really had herpes. Ah, high school." [laughs]

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] Aw, that's too bad. That's true. It is possible to get it again. Most, most people don't. But if you don't mount enough of an immune response the first time around, there you go.

**Justin:**

Yep.

**Sydnee:**

Um, here's the part of Sawbones where we talk about some, some unfortunate experiments that were done.

**Justin:**

They're a required segment.

**Sydnee:**

A required segment called, Pre-IRB, where we talk about things that were done before we knew what ethics and research were. Rudolf Steiner did some experiments on people in 1875, where he took fluid from the blisters of people with chicken pox, and rubbed it into the open skin of healthy people, and gave them chicken pox...

**Justin:**

[laughs] And then went home and had a nice dinner with his family.

**Sydnee:**

... and then we knew... [laughs]

**Justin:**

... satisfied with a job well-done.

**Sydnee:**

Proving, proving that this was how... that this was how you got chicken pox. I don't know.

**Justin:**

And he was like, so proud of himself, you know, he's like, "Hey. Good news everybody. Guess what I figured out." Like, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I know.

**Sydnee:**

Um, we, uh... James von Bokay had kind of... He was, he was a scientist—

**Justin:**

Now that's a name. That's a name.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah, isn't he? Isn't that a great name? ... who had found the connection, he thought, between chicken pox and shingles, and we're going to get into shingles, but the two, uh, disease processes had been theorized to be related for a long time. He was the first one to kind of connect them.

And then there were some experiments, again, unfortunate experiments that took place in the '20s and '30s, uh, on kids, supposedly in pursuit of vaccinating them.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

I never found enough specifics on that to feel comfortable one way or the other, but they took fluid from shingles blisters, so from older patients who had shingles—

**Justin:**

I'm going to ralph. This sucks.

**Sydnee:**

... and they rubbed it into the skin of healthy kids, um, again, supposedly trying to immunize them, and then gave them chicken pox. Um...

**Justin:**

Oh. You know, they lied to 'em about what it was, too. You know, they told them it was like, "It's okay, kids. This is like, Mickey cream, or something. This is angel juice, like... "

**Sydnee:**

From the 1920s and '30s. Angel juice?

**Justin:**

Mickey doesn't hold weight. I don't know what kids... I don't know what kids in the '20s were into.

**Sydnee:**

This is some—

**Justin:**

This is like blonde...

**Sydnee:**

... some candy, candy goo.

**Justin:**

Candy goo.

**Sydnee:**

It'll make you... all your food taste like candy after this.

**Justin:**

Something. I don't know. Just rub it on yourself, idiot. Here's five cents.

**Sydnee:**

Um, the... Finally, in the 1950s, they, they isolated the same varicella virus from both, uh, shingles and chicken pox sores, and, and finally made the connection. If you're interested in why it's called chicken pox—

**Justin:**

I am.

**Sydnee:**

... there are a few different... There are a few different stories as to, uh, why this happened. Um, Samuel Johnson, uh, and this is one of maybe the most popular rumor, called it chicken pox because this was a comparison to smallpox.



**Justin:**

Oh. So it was...

**Sydnee:**

Because it wasn't as severe of a disease. It's like, "Well, that's the chicken pox."

**Justin:**

Okay. Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

So that's one theory. Also, because it makes your skin look like a chicken pecked it. That's another theory. Uh, uh, another is that it comes from the old English word, uh, giccan, which is the word for itching—

**Justin:**

Sounds kind of like chicken.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. Sounds kind of like chicken, so the itchin' pox, the giccan pox, the chicken pox.

**Justin:**

It's probably that one. Old etymology is never... Like, it's, uh, etymology, entomology?

**Sydnee:**

Mm-hmm. Yeah. Etymology. Entomology is the bug one.

**Justin:**

Yeah. Okay. That's what... Yeah. It's never as satisfying as you want it to be. There's always some weird, roundabout road there.

**Sydnee:**

Um, there's also been this theory that the blisters are sort of like chickpeas.

**Justin:**

Gross.

**Sydnee:**

I don't really think are. I think that's a stretch.

**Justin:**

And also, they don't. Like, that's... Yeah. That's whack.

**Sydnee:**

I kind of like giccanpox, myself.

**Justin:**

Uh, Sydnee, I know we need to go to the billing department, but, uh, here's a quickie from Zack.

**Sydnee:**

Ooh.

**Justin:**

Um, "I had chicken pox when I was five. I would scratch so bad that I would start bleeding. I still have scars. To stop this, my parents started duct-taping socks to my hands at night because I scratched mostly then." [laughs]

**Sydnee:**

That is a recommendation from doctors sometimes. Your parents were not totally off their rockers. That's okay.

**Justin:**

All right. So, are you ready to go to the billing department?

**Sydnee:**

Let's go.

[ad break]

**Justin:**

Sydnee, uh, I have a quick story for you from our friend, Michael Sullivan.

**Sydnee:**

Oh. What does Michael Sullivan have to tell us?

**Justin:**

He has one visible scar from the chicken pox. He didn't get it until he was 13 years old, and, "One night, as we sat at the dinner table, my father noticed I had a red place on my forehead. After some teasing that his little boy had

his first zit, my dad tried to pop it. Needless to say, uh, it didn't, but I now have a nice scar to remind me that fathers aren't always right." [laughs]

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] And you can point to that for the rest of your life and go, "Look what you did to me."

**Justin:**

Look at... Look at this. It's all because of you.

**Sydnee:**

Now I've mentioned shingles a few times, and, uh, you may already be aware that there's a relationship between chicken pox and shingles, a very close relationship, as in, it's the same virus.

**Justin:**

I've heard this.

**Sydnee:**

Yes. So, uh, after you have had chicken pox, and gotten better, the chicken pox virus, it likes you. It doesn't want to leave you.

**Justin:**

It's comfortable.

**Sydnee:**

It wants to... It wants to hang around. But not just anywhere, it wants to hang around in the dorsal root ganglion of your nervous system.

**Justin:**

That's where... I mean, that's where I just...

**Sydnee:**

That's where anybody would hang around. The important thing to know is that it can... It can chill there, hidden deep within your nervous system and be reactivated in times of trauma or stress on your body, like a... like a surgery, or an illness, or just sometimes it just seems to do it randomly.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Um, it, it can cause blistering. Um, you may have seen shingles blisters before. They can look pretty impressive. They look a little worse than chicken pox do. Uh, we do not describe shingles as a dew-drop on a rose petal.

**Justin:**

No.

**Sydnee:**

Um, and they, they can, um, be extremely painful. The thing that... that really clues you in that this is shingles, is that it's in what we call a dermatomal distribution. And that means that it follows the path of a certain nerve root.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

So it will only be on one of side of your body when it occurs.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Now, it could reoccur later on the other side, but the important thing is, if it is on both sides of your body at the same time, it's not shingles. It's something else, but it's not shingles. It'll only be on one side. It'll be in kind of a strip, like a line—

**Justin:**

Oof. Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

... like, of blisters. Um, it can... You can have some numbness, some tingling, swelling, sensitivity. It can be very hard to treat, and like I said, it can be extremely painful, um, and it can also come back again and again. Um, you can only get shingles if you've had chicken pox before. If you haven't had chicken pox, and somebody has shingles, and you are exposed to them, you can get chicken pox.

**Justin:**

That's confusing.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. But, I mean, the important thing to know is that the... It's the same virus.

**Justin:**

My friend... I have a friend who listens to this program, uh, named Russ, and he got shingles last week.

**Sydnee:**

Oh. That sucks.

**Justin:**

And I didn't... He said it was excruciating, and I didn't make fun of him for getting what sounds like such an old man disease, um, because it does sound like an old man disease to me. It has a very old man vibe, so I want to make fun of him now, here publicly. [blows raspberry] Take that, Russ.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] I won't make fun of him. I'm sorry, Russ, because it's... I have not had shingles, but I understand, and I have witnessed that the pain is, is pretty bad.

**Justin:**

It's common, right? Like, one in three adults will get shingles in their lifetime is what the sign at Walmart said.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] Shingles is pretty common. Um, if you're wondering about the name, shingles, uh, it's—

**Justin:**

Which is terrible, by the way.

**Sydnee:**

I know.

**Justin:**

I don't know how they landed on that one.

**Sydnee:**

It comes from the Latin singulus, which means girdle, because of like, the strip, the pattern in which it will appear. Um, it's the same, actually, with zoster. That's the other, you know, herpes zoster, varicella zoster. It's the other name you'll hear for shingles. It's from the Greek for belt or girdle, zoster is.

**Justin:**

Oh, okay.

**Sydnee:**

Um, again, just because the way the rash looks. Uh, so shingles is pretty painful, and you'd rather not have it. Um, and we'll get into how you can't in just a second. Now, here is where I explain to you why the chicken pox vaccine is important.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

I'm prefacing it. This is the... If there was like, a bold title over this section of the podcast, that's what it would say. So, many people ask me, "Does my kid really need the chicken pox vaccine, though? Really? It's just chicken pox." Okay. In the US, prior to the vaccine, chicken pox caused four million cases a year, 10,600 hospitalizations a year, and between 100 and 150 deaths a year. Now, I know that doesn't seem like a huge number compared to some of the other diseases we've covered, but those are 100 to 150 preventable, and maybe kid deaths that it prevented... or that the vaccine can prevent.

So that is why the vaccine is important. A live attenuated vaccine was developed in the 1970s in Japan by Dr. Takahashi. In 1995, it came to the US, and it's available now. You get two doses, one at 12 to 15 months, the second at four to six years, and it results in a 90% reduction in your chance of getting the virus. And it also adds to herd immunity, which of course, is the more people around you who are immune, the less likely you are to get it. And that is why we don't see chicken pox anymore. Well, I mean, pretty much. It's still out there, but it is incredibly rare.

**Justin:**

Is there any effort, or hope, or plan that like, this could be like, eliminated in the same way that smallpox was?

**Sydnee:**

I think... You know, I'd have to read more about all of the, the hosts to chicken pox, and if there's anything... I don't know if there's any other animal that can host ch—you know, that was the thing about smallpox, is that smallpox is just purely a human disease—

**Justin:**

Oh, okay. Right.

**Sydnee:**

... and that's why it was easier to eradicate.

**Justin:**

Oh, that makes sense.

**Sydnee:**

Um, I am not 100% certain... I mean I'm assuming chicken pox is the same way, but I don't, I don't know that. I don't know that. So, I don't know if chicken pox could be eradicated in the same way as smallpox could.

**Justin:**

Here's a—

**Sydnee:**

That's a good question.

**Justin:**

Here's a nice little chicken pox story from Dana. Uh, Dana says, "When I was six, I came down with chicken pox the day after my mom and stepdad returned from their honeymoon. My stepdad likes to joke, it was like me saying, 'Oh, yeah. Just try to love me. Just try it. I dare you to love this itchy spotted mess.' But, he took off work and bought me an epic Play-Doh beauty shop toy. I'm 33 now and he still texts me if he hears I'm even slightly sick to see how I'm doing."

**Sydnee:**

Aww.

**Justin:**

Sweet.

**Sydnee:**

That is a sweet story. Um, no. Chicken pox can only be gotten by humans by the way.

**Justin:**

Well, let's... Come on, y'all. Let's... Let's get together on this thing. [laughs]

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] Um, so there is also a shingles vaccine, by the way.

**Justin:**

Yes. It's more recent.

**Sydnee:**

Yes. Or a zoster vaccine. Same thing. It's developed in 2006. Um, it's really just for older people, and that's mainly because the complications from shingles tend to be worse, the older you are. So initially it was just for 60 and up. Um, it was expanded to 50 and up for certain populations. Um, it prevents shingles about half the time, like 51% success rate.

**Justin:**

[laughs] Nice try.

**Sydnee:**

Um, it does reduce the long-term pain complications that can result from shingles by 67%.

**Justin:**

Ooh.

**Sydnee:**

But, again, it's still worth it, because if you're one of them it counts, you can get pain from shingles that lasts forever.

**Justin:**

Sorry, Russ.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. Not everybody does. Not... There's hope, but some people have pain forever after shingles, so I mean, like, this is a big deal.

**Justin:**



Russ is a contemptible human being, though. I do hope it haunts him for the rest of his natural days.

**Sydnee:**

I don't support any of these statements. It is a live virus vaccine. Actually the chicken pox vaccine is a live virus vaccine, as well, so these... They... They're live attenuated viruses. Attenuated, meaning made, made—harmless viruses. But the, the reason that's important to know is there are certain people with compromised immune systems who maybe can't get these vaccines. So it is... I mean, you do need to talk to your doctor about these vaccines.

Um, you can get some chicken pox at the site of the vaccine when you get the zoster vaccine. It's possible.

**Justin:**

Hmm. So not worth getting, you think.

**Sydnee:**

No. I'm not saying that. I'm not saying that. Not at all. No. I... You know how I feel about vaccines.

**Justin:**

Uh, here's another one from Nicole. Uh, "I got the chicken pox... " This is great. "I got the chicken pox right at the end of kindergarten, so I missed the last few days. Luckily, I was non-contagious just in time for my uncle's wedding, in which I was a flower girl. However, I still had all my scabs, so that was cute. But the kicker is, my grandmother used the chicken pox as an excuse when she returned the dress that I actually did wear, back to the store, claiming I was too sick to be in the wedding."

**Sydnee:**

Oh no.

**Justin:**

[laughs] That's savage.

**Sydnee:**

That's wrong, spreading chicken pox, and the next...

**Justin:**

Well, she... Yeah. That's pretty brutal.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. Fluid from the blisters. Ooh.

**Justin:**

Grandma, get the bargains at any cost.

**Sydnee:**

Any cost. Uh, now as far as what do you do if you get chicken pox, which hopefully this won't be a problem for you, but just for... maybe for most of us, it's... this is reminiscing. There are some, um, natural remedies that people will recommend, things like honey, and baking soda, and vinegar, um, vitamin E... I saw that even in one of the stories. Somebody said vitamin E was recommended for them. Carrot and coriander soup, and garlic. Calamine is pretty widely used. Most people use calamine lotion. That's fine. It soothes the skin. Um, people like oatmeal baths. They feel like it's soothing.

Um, what you... What you really have to do is, don't itch, don't scratch—I mean, you're going to itch. Don't scratch. Don't scratch. They're more likely to scar when you scratch them, and if you scratch them, and open them up, and then introduce bacteria, you can get infections. Um, antihistamines might help with the... with the itching. Cool compresses will help with the itching.

You can use fever reducers like Tylenol and ibuprofen if it's appropriate. Do not use aspirin. We've talked about this before. It can lead to a complication called Reye's Syndrome in kids. Anyway, the important thing is, don't use aspirin. Stick with ibuprofen and Tylenol, especially in children.

Um, and for most people, you just wait and watch, and they'll get better, for most people. You may... You may find, some people can get blisters, like in their mouths or in other mucus membranes, and so then you might want to limit what kind of foods and things you eat, you know, not to, you know, make those worse, but, um, you can just wait until it gets better.

**Justin:**

Uh, I've got a few more stories I've gotta share for it.

**Sydnee:**

Oh, and don't spread it. Don't spread it.

**Justin:**

Speaking of, this story is from MJ. "I got chicken pox when I was 11 or 12. Uh, it was one of those things that traveled down my street to each and every kid that lived there, all 11 of us."

You know, quick sidebar. This is something that I think people who weren't in the, the chicken pox generation, uh, uh, the last chicken pox generation, don't understand, but like, chicken pox was just such a fact of life, that if somebody you knew got it, or like, somebody in your family got it, they would... Your parents would just let you kick it with them until you got it because—

**Sydnee:**

Not just let you.

**Justin:**

... like, they would force you to kick it with them, because like, let's just get it over with.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah.

**Justin:**

Like, let's just get it and get it done.

**Sydnee:**

Exactly.

**Justin:**

Let's just do it. Um, so, uh, this got passed up and down MJ's street. Um, "I knew I wasn't allowed to go to my friend's house because she and her sister had it, but I didn't see anything wrong with playing with her through the chain link fence that separated our yards. Of course, I obviously didn't know that it could be transmitted through the stuffed dog that she and I were passing back and forth."

**Sydnee:**

Aw.

**Justin:**

"Our respective parents caught on to what we were doing around the same time and put a stop to it, but the damage was done."

**Sydnee:**

There actually used to be chicken pox parties, uh, that were popular, so if one kid in, in like, a neighborhood or friend group got chicken pox, the moms, or dads, or you know, whatever, parental unit, would all... would get all of the kids together and not just have them play together, but you would see like, gross things, like pass around suckers for them to share, and share like, drinks and things.

**Justin:**

Ugh. Grody.

**Sydnee:**

Just to like, really make sure that all the kids got chicken pox, just so you could get it... Which, I mean, there, there is some sound reasoning in, in the sense that it was safer to get it when you were a kid than it was when you were an adult, and so if everybody was definitely going to get it, you'd rather your kid get it when they're, you know, five or six, than when they're 20.

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

But still...

**Justin:**

Uh, last story, and it... 'cause I know we've got to wrap it up.

**Sydnee:**

Well, I want to hear your chicken pox story, too.

**Justin:**

I really don't remember that much about it. I've been racking my brain trying to come up with anything. We had it. I remember it was miserable.

**Sydnee:**

Sure... surely, all three of you boys got it together.

**Justin:**

Yeah. Dad has like, video of us, like lying around with chicken pox, just dying. It was miserable.

**Sydnee:**

You don't remember who was patient zero?

**Justin:**

Uh, it was probably me. I think it was me, I assume.

**Sydnee:**

Huh.

**Justin:**

I don't... I don't remember. I really don't.

**Sydnee:**

How do you not remember your chicken pox? Okay.

**Justin:**

Um, do you remember yours?

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. You didn't ask me—

**Justin:**

Well, give me the Reader's Digest then.

**Sydnee:**

... my chicken pox story.

**Justin:**

I am.

**Sydnee:**

I got chicken pox when I was 14.

**Justin:**

That's pretty late.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. I know it was late. My sister, Taylor, my... the... my sister that, you know, was younger than me, and we would've gotten chicken pox at the time I was young, got it. Taylor got it, and... at school, and my mom had us sleep together, and share food and drink, and I never got it. Um, I thought I

was immune for a long time. I thought I was like, the lucky one immune patient.

And then, when I was, uh, 14, in high school, heading back from Christmas break, uh, right before I went back to school, I had a spot on my stomach that I didn't know what it was, but it itched like crazy, and I had scratched the heck out of it, and opened it up, and um, my mom took me to my doctor, who I now work with, one of my colleagues.

**Justin:**

Oh, wow.

**Sydnee:**

It was really cool. He was my family doctor at the time, and, um, he... I... he looked at it, and he said, "Hold on a second," and then he brought me back a dermatology book, because he knew I wanted to be a doctor.

**Justin:**

Who is this?

**Sydnee:**

This is Dr. Becker.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

And Dr. Becker brought me back a dermatology book, and handed to me, and said, "Sydnee, go through this and tell me what... Come find me when you tell me... when you know what you have." So I sat there looking through this derm book, and finally I went and sought him out, and said, "Dr. Becker, do I have chicken pox?" And he said, "You got it."

**Justin:**

[laughs]

**Sydnee:**

So it was awful. It was terrible.

**Justin:**

Yeah. It's miserable.

**Sydnee:**

I was so crazy sick. My rash wasn't terrible, but I was so crazy sick, and I missed my first week back of, of school.

**Justin:**

Um, here is... this is... Speaking of missing things, uh, this one's from Kate, and this is a heroic one. Um, "My mom and her sisters planned a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Germany and Austria when my sisters and I were kids. Two days into the trip, she called to check in, to learn all three of us had the chicken pox. Amy was three months old. I was four years old. And Susie was almost seven. My mom hadn't even left us overnight and was our full-time caregiver since the day Susie was born.

My dad put us all in his undershirts, invested in calamine lotion, and listened to us whine and complain for the next 10 days. I had it the worst of the three of us, spots in my nose, ears, mouth, in between my toes, and I also happened to be the whiniest, so all my sympathies went to my dad when I had kids of my own.

Kate, by the way, happened to be the one to contract the shingles two years ago at age 33." Um, she said, "I learned, uh, shortly before that, through a blood draw during pregnancy, that I had also lost some of my MMR immunity, even though I was up-to-date on vaccines."

All these are weird.

**Sydnee:**

They are, and that is... Again, the one thing I would stress about chicken pox, is that even though, chicken pox, we look back on as this like, fun... like fun childhood rite of passage that we're all supposed to like, "Oh, everybody gets chicken pox." The thing is, for, for, uh, the majority of us it was something just really annoying.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Or maybe like, Justin, you don't even remember very well. For me, I remember getting pretty darned sick, but I was still okay. But it... It can have serious complications and definitely, especially now when there is such... there is, you know, there are a lot of people who haven't had chicken pox. Most of them hopefully, have had the vaccine, but for people who are

just protected through herd immunity, it's vitally important that those people don't get chicken pox, because as they get older, it can be worse. And certainly, for anyone who becomes pregnant, it can be pretty bad. So, um, get vaccinated. It's a good vaccine. There is a reason that we made it.

**Justin:**

Yeah. It's good stuff.

**Sydnee:**

Get the chicken pox vaccine. If you're eligible, get the shingles vaccine. Talk to your doctor about both. Again, they are live attenuated virus vaccines, so you do need to talk to your doctor about them, but as long as it is safe, and your doctor says it's okay, you should get them. I am fully in support of them. It is no different. I, I see this like, divide. There's like all vaccines, and then there are all these wafflers out there, who are like, "Well, I don't know about the flu vaccine, and I don't know about the chicken pox vaccine." The vaccine is good. Get your vaccines. Please. No matter what anyone tells you.

**Justin:**

Um, folks, that's going to do it for us. Thank you so much for listening. Thanks to The Taxpayers for letting us use your song, Medicines, as the intro and outro of our program. Um, hey. We're going to be going on a cruise in March, if you want to come. Uh, we're going to go cruise through Mexico, and it's going to be great. It's a JoCo Cruise.

Uh, there's going to be a ton of cool people there. Jonathan Coulton, um, it's his cruise, so he gets to go for sure. Uh, you know who else is going to be there? Um, Max Temkin, creator of Cards Against Humanity, is going to be there. Uh, John Bernstein is going to be there. Uh, uh, Aimee Mann is going to be there. Uh, Nerf Herder is going to be there, Welcome to Night Vale is going to be there. It's going to be cray. There's tons of other people.

Will Wheaton, uh, uh, uh, uh, Ed Brubaker, Rhea Butcher, um, Matthew Weiner, creator of Madmen. Everybody's going to be there, and you can, too. Go to [jococruise.com](http://jococruise.com) and come with us. It's going to be fun.

I think that's it. That's going to do it for us?

**Sydnee:**

Yes.

**Justin:**

And sorry this episode's so late, by the way. Sorry. It's... Sydnee's on hospital service this week, so just long hours working.



**Sydnee:**

We'll get better. I promise. We're working on it. Yeah.

**Justin:**

We'll get better. Well.. Hang, hang in there.

**Sydnee:**

Just stick with us, folks.

**Justin:**

But, uh, we'll here... It'll be... probably be here next week. Uh, but until then, my name is Justin McElroy.

**Sydnee:**

I'm Sydnee McElroy.

**Justin:**

And as always, don't drill a hole in your head.

[theme music plays]

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