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## NOTABLE NOTES

**Garbanzo-Icchen-Cowardly-Pox**

Jordan J. Cole, BS; Eric L. Maranda, BS; Tarek Salih, BS; Scott F. Lindsey, MD; Joaquin Jimenez, MD

Recognize this infectious disease? It's highly unlikely—but had the etymology gone slightly differently, you undoubtedly would have. Widely known today by the moniker “chickenpox,” the origin of the name (and the disease itself) has led to quite a bit of head scratching. Caused by varicella-zoster virus (VZV), the itchy infection was first formally reported under the name “chickenpox” in the 17th century.

Several theories exist regarding where the name came from. *A Dictionary of the English Language*, published in 1755 by Dr Samuel Johnson, states that chickenpox is called such “from its being of no very great danger,”<sup>1</sup> referring to the mildness of the disease in comparison with that of smallpox. Being weaker and less dangerous than smallpox, it is meek, tame, cowardly—chicken. This does seem to make sense, but so too does the theory put forth by Thomas Fuller in *Exanthemologia* in 1730. Fuller attributes the name to the appearance of the eruption itself—as if chickens had pecked repeatedly at the child affected.<sup>1</sup> Another theory related to the eruption's appearance is that of Charles Fagge, published in 1886 in *The Principles and Practice of Medicine*. Rather than chicken pecks, he postulated, the lesions' resemblance to chickpeas, also known as garbanzo beans, led to the name.<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, the origin of the colloquial term for chickenpox's ghost, “shingles,” is widely accepted as the Latin word “cingulum” meaning “belt” or “girdle,” owing to the classic location of the eruption. A linguistic take on the chickenpox dilemma proves less satisfying, but still raises a definite possibility. The Old English term for “to itch” is *giccan*, and the Middle

English (12th to 15th century) terms are *yicche* or *icchen*.<sup>2</sup> With a little imagination, it's not difficult to picture the progression of *icchen* (itching) pox into “chicken” pox, especially considering that most of the pox's victims are those notorious for malapropisms—children.

Call it what you may, the dermatologic manifestations of VZV remain the same—although considerably less conspicuous in those who have been vaccinated and still develop the disease. The eruption in these partially protected patients is typically more maculopapular, with few lesions progressing to vesicular form.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, chickenpox in the nonvaccinated causes vesicular lesions classically described as “dew drops on a rose petal.” Perhaps it should have been called “rose-pox,” but no matter. After all, “a rose by any other name [does] smell as sweet”—or itch as much.

**Author Affiliations:** Department of Dermatology and Cutaneous Surgery, University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, Miami, Florida.

**Corresponding Author:** Eric L. Maranda, BS, Department of Dermatology and Cutaneous Surgery, University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, 1475 NW 12th Ave, Miami, FL 33136 (emaranda@med.miami.edu).

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