



## **SHINGLES: What You Should Know**

### **Shingles: Where does it come from?**

The often-painful outbreak of skin sores called shingles affects an estimated 300,000 people yearly in the U.S.

- Shingles, which is also known as herpes zoster, is caused by the varicella-zoster virus – the same virus that causes chickenpox.
- Many people get infection with varicella-zoster during childhood. Shingles develops when the virus reactivates in later life. Though people in their 20's and 30's can get shingles, it is more common in the later years.
- Shingles outbreaks consist of blister-like sores that most often appear in a band across one side of the chest, stomach or face. In fact, the name "shingles" comes from the Latin word for belt or girdle.
- Though shingles can be painful and distressing, treatment is available, and there are steps you can take to reduce or minimize its effects. See your doctor as soon as symptoms appear.

### **Giving and Getting Shingles**

A person must have had chickenpox before he or she can come down with shingles. Chickenpox is a highly contagious disease. Most people catch it during childhood because the virus can be spread through the air as well as through contact with the rash. A vaccine for chickenpox is now part of routine childhood immunizations. It is not known how this will affect the risk of shingles.

In contrast, a person can't catch shingles. He or she must already have had a case of chickenpox and harbor the virus in the nervous system. In shingles, the virus does not normally spread to the bloodstream or lungs, so the virus is not spread in air. Because the shingles rash contains active virus particles, however, a person who has never had chickenpox can catch chickenpox by exposure to someone with shingles.

There are some susceptible people with whom contact should be avoided during an active shingles outbreak:

- Anyone who has not had chickenpox, especially infants and young children.
- Pregnant women, who can be particularly vulnerable to chickenpox if they have not had it before.
- People with weakened immune systems.

### **Who is at Risk?**

About one in ten people who had chickenpox as children will develop shingles as adults.

- The risk of shingles increases with age; most cases occur in people over age 50, with a peak incidence between 60 to 79 years.
- The older you are, the more severe a shingles attack is likely to be, and the longer it may last.
- People with weakened immune systems are at special risk for shingles, including people undergoing radiation or chemotherapy for cancer, or people infected with HIV (the AIDS virus).

A shingles outbreak in someone with a weakened immune system can be serious or even life-threatening if left unchecked.



## Why Do People Get Shingles?

For most people, the virus that can cause shingles remains undisturbed in our bodies after chickenpox infection. There it stays, harmless, unless for some reason it is activated.

- After its first infection – chickenpox – the virus remains for years in nerve cells next to the spinal cord.
- Physical or emotional stress, which contributes to the weakening of the immune system, may trigger an outbreak of shingles. And although the reason is unclear, it is thought that the immune system may weaken as a natural result of aging. Infection, surgery, injury, and certain kinds of cancer may also activate the virus.
- When activated, the virus travels along nerves to the skin, where it breaks out in the form of shingles.
- The risk of a second shingles attack is less than for the first. It recurs in only about four to six percent of cases.

## Recognizing an Outbreak

Early signs of a shingles outbreak are often vague, and can easily be mistaken for other illnesses.

- Isolated pain or numbness in a major nerve in or under the skin, or a “shooting” pain around the trunk or down an arm or leg.
- Mild flu-like symptoms, such as headache, fever and upset stomach, also may occur.

Early on, these symptoms can be confused with other illnesses, such as an ulcer, ruptured disc, pneumonia, appendicitis, or even a heart attack. Once the rash appears, the diagnosis is made more easily.

- Lesions (rash) appear on the skin from 1 to 14 days later, usually in a band on one side of the body or back or on one side of the face. The number of lesions varies from person to person.
- Lesions become fluid-filled blisters in 2 to 4 days, and continue appearing for several more days. These turn from clear to cloudy in appearance.
- Slowly, the blisters crust, scab and heal, most often within a few weeks.
- Once the blisters are healed, some people continue to experience pain for a month or longer. Discoloration or scarring of the skin also is possible.

## Degrees of Pain

The range of pain caused by shingles is wide.

- For some, shingles is much like chickenpox – sores may sting or burn and begin to itch as they heal. Cool compresses, calamine or menthol lotions, and medicines like aspirin or acetaminophen can relieve these symptoms.
- For others, shingles can cause extreme pain for weeks or months after the blisters heal. For these people, the slightest touch, contact with clothing, or even a breeze can be unbearable.
- Pain can be relieved with pain medicine or other treatments prescribed by your doctor.

## Being Aware of Complications

The risk of pain and other complications of shingles increase with age. The most common complication is pain that lingers after the rash has healed. This chronic pain is called post-herpetic neuralgia.

- About half of shingles patients over age 60 are at risk for post-herpetic neuralgia, which may be caused by damage to nerve endings.
- Post-herpetic neuralgia can last a long time after a shingles outbreak heals. Pain may last months or years, but even in severe cases it often disappears with time. People who endure this long-term pain also may experience depression, insomnia and weight loss.
- Your doctor can suggest a variety of therapies that may relieve chronic pain.
- Vision and hearing problems are less common, but equally serious, and can occur whenever shingles appears on the face. If this happens, you should see your doctor immediately.
- In patients with weakened immune systems, shingles infections can spread to the lungs, central nervous system and brain.



It is very important to report any symptoms to your doctor. Proper treatment should be started early.

## **Treating Shingles**

Treatments for shingles are available and continue to be improved. The choice of treatment depends on the severity of the infection, overall health, and the age of the person affected.

- Certain prescription medications may reduce the severity, pain and/or duration of a shingles outbreak when used early – ideally within the first two or three days of an outbreak of the rash. In addition, there are other medicines that your doctor may use to help manage your shingles outbreak.

See your doctor as soon as you suspect shingles.

## **Easing Your Mind**

Shingles is a serious condition, but education and treatment programs can go a long way toward minimizing its complications. Make sure you and those you care about learn as much as possible about shingles and practice common sense by seeing your doctor as soon as symptoms appear.

## **Protecting Yourself from Shingles**

The best defense against shingles is awareness. There are steps you can take to minimize the severity of an outbreak.

- Be alert to the early warning signs of shingles: Pain on or under the skin accompanied by rash, mild fever and other flu-like symptoms.
- Seek early medical attention as soon as you suspect a shingles outbreak.

## **The Shingles Vaccine**

A vaccine is now available for prevention of shingles. Zostavax® is approved for those aged 60 and above and is given as a one time shot. In the studies, it prevented shingles in 50% of those given the vaccine and decreased the risk of post-herpetic neuralgia by about 70%. It is most effective for those aged 60-69. It appears to be fairly safe. Talk to your provider if you would like to know more about this vaccine.

