



SHINGLES (Herpes Zoster)

What is SHINGLES?

Shingles is a localized, painful skin rash due to the varicella zoster virus (VZV), the same virus that causes chickenpox. It occurs only in people who have had chickenpox in the past and represents a reactivation of the inactive varicella virus. Why the virus reactivates in some individuals and not in others is unknown.

Who gets shingles?

Anyone who has recovered from chickenpox may develop shingles. The disease is primarily seen in people 50 years and older, but occasionally occurs in younger individuals. It affects both sexes and all races equally and can occur at any time of the year.

How is shingles spread?

A person must have had chickenpox infection in the past to develop shingles. A person exposed to an individual with shingles will not get shingles but may get chickenpox if they have never had it in the past. The virus is present at the site of the rash and is contagious until the rash is crusted. The virus that causes shingles is spread through direct contact with the rash and **not** through sneezing, coughing or casual contact, as is the case with chickenpox.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

The first sign is often a tingling feeling on the skin, itchiness or a stabbing pain. After several days, a rash appears beginning as a band or patch of raised dots on the side of the trunk or face. It then develops into small, fluid-filled blisters which begin to dry out and crust over within a few days. When the rash is at its peak, symptoms can range from mild itching to extreme and intense pain. The rash lasts about 7-10 days, and heals within 2-4 weeks.

How soon after infection do symptoms appear?

The virus is inactive in someone who has had chickenpox in the past. It can reactivate many years later.

Does past infection of shingles make a person immune?

Most people who have shingles have only one episode with the disease in their lifetime. Those with impaired immune systems (AIDS, cancer or leukemia) may suffer from repeat attacks.

What are the complications associated with shingles?

Shingles is not usually dangerous to healthy individuals although it can cause great discomfort during an attack. Anyone with shingles on the upper half of their face, no matter how mild, should seek medical care. There is some danger that the virus could cause damage to the eye resulting in blindness. Complications are rare but may include partial facial paralysis (usually temporary), ear damage or encephalitis (inflammation of the brain).

What is the treatment for shingles?

Most cases of shingles resolve on their own without any treatment. Medications are available for treating patients with complications. These medications should be started as soon as possible after the rash appears and will help shorten how long the illness lasts and the severity of the illness. Contact your doctor as soon as possible to discuss treatment options.

What can be done to prevent shingles?

Chickenpox must be prevented in order to prevent shingles. A vaccine for chickenpox is now available and it is hoped that immunized individuals will be less likely to develop shingles in later life.