



THE FACTS:

Herpes Zoster (Shingles)

What Is It?

Shingles is a viral infection of the central nervous system, which may cause a painful rash with blisters. The varicella-zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox, causes herpes zoster or shingles. After an individual has chickenpox, this virus lives in the nerves and is never fully cleared from the body. Occasionally, years later, the virus may become active again causing shingles. Anyone who has had chickenpox can develop shingles at some point in their lifetime. People over the age of 50 have the greatest risk.

What are the Symptoms?

- Pain, tingling or burning sensation limited to a specific part of the body.
- Rash followed by blisters. The blisters appear 4-5 days later. The blisters appear on a broad streak of reddened skin along sensory-nerve routes to a particular area of the skin. They occur most often on the chest, and spread on one side of the body. New blisters continue to form for 3-5 days. At first they are moist, but after a day or two they dry to form scabs. The rash usually lasts about 3-4 weeks before it begins to fade.
- Other symptoms may include fever, feeling run down, and general fatigue.

What are the Complications?

- Generally shingles heal well and problems are few.
- The most common complication of shingles is post herpetic neuralgia or long-term pain that persists for months or years in the nerves where the blisters have been.
- Blisters on the face, nose or near the eye require immediate medical care.
- Disseminated zoster (rash covers a large area) may occur in a few persons who are immunocompromised.

How Is It Spread?

- The virus is spread to those who have never had it before, by direct contact with fluid from blisters, or by touching objects contaminated with this fluid. The role of airborne spread is not clear. Once all blisters are crusted over, the virus can no longer spread.
- Disseminated zoster may also be spread from one person to another by coughing, sneezing and touching something that has come in contact with the virus.

What Should You Do?

- Contact your doctor. Medication given within the first few days of the rash may speed healing and reduce the pain.
- Take cool baths. Don't scratch. Scratching can cause infection and may leave scars.

**For Further Information Contact the Infectious Disease Program at 625-8318
or toll free 1-888-294-6630, ext. 8318.**