

Shingles (Herpes Zoster)

What is Shingles?

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 of Shingles?

Pain, tingling or burning sensation limited to a specific part of the body.

Within 1 – 3 days a red rash appears (in crops). The rash becomes blister like. 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 2- 4 weeks before it begins to fade.

Other symptoms may include fever, feeling run down, and general fatigue.

What are the complications of Shingles?

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 Shingles 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.

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 or use a cold compress. Don't scratch. Scratching can cause infection and may leave scars.

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a health care professional about any health concerns.

For further information contact the Infectious Disease Program at 625-8318
or toll free 1-888-294-6630, ext. 8318.

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