

Shingles

What is Shingles?

- Shingles or herpes zoster is caused by the virus that causes chickenpox, - *varicella-zoster*. Once a person has had chickenpox, usually in childhood, the virus goes dormant or “falls asleep” in one or more nerve roots and can re-activate causing a painful skin rash *decades after infection with the virus*.
- Not everyone who has had chickenpox will develop shingles but it occurs most frequently among adults over age 50 and in people whose immune system is compromised.
- Approximately 50% of persons who live to 85 years old will have experienced shingles.
- It is not known what causes the dormant varicella virus to reactivate and cause a case of shingles.
- While you will likely have shingles only once, some people get it several times.

What are the Signs and Symptoms of Shingles?

When the virus becomes active, you may get symptoms such as rash, itching, and pain followed by clusters of blisters.

- The rash appears along the nerve pathway where the virus has been dormant. Common sites for the rash include the chest, back, buttocks, neck, face and scalp. The rash usually lasts 7–10 days, with complete healing within 2-4 weeks.
- The blisters will break, dry out, and then crust over similar to the original chickenpox infection.
- In people with weakened immune systems, the rash and symptoms may be more severe, take longer to heal and permanent scarring of the skin may occur.

Complications

Post-herpetic neuralgia (PHN) - The pain experienced with shingles persists for weeks, months or years after the rash heals. The primary risk factor for the development of PHN is age.

Eye Damage - if the virus spreads up the nerve that connects to your eyes, eye infection, eye pain, or blindness can occur.

Ramsay Hunt syndrome - If the virus spreads to two particular nerves in your face, then this syndrome can develop and can lead to temporary facial paralysis and loss of hearing and taste.

Is Shingles contagious?

Yes and No.

- Exposure to someone with shingles can cause chickenpox - not shingles - in a person who has never had chickenpox. You can not catch shingles from another person, since shingles is caused by a reactivation of your own chickenpox virus.
- In hospital settings, transmission has been documented between patients, from patients to health-care workers, but transmission from health-care workers to patients has not been documented. Persons with shingles are less likely to transmit the varicella virus to susceptible people if their blisters are covered.

What should I do if I get shingles?

- Consult with your health care provider.
- Cover the blisters.
- Avoid contact with infants, children, pregnant women and adults who have never had the chickenpox.
- Rest.

Treatment

Anti-viral drugs are used to help minimize the spread of the rash, the pain associated with it and to help the blisters crust over and heal faster. Anti-viral drugs may also help to reduce the risk of developing the chronic pain of PHN.

Prevention

Avoid getting chickenpox - If you haven't had chickenpox in the past, make sure you don't touch the blisters of people with either chickenpox or shingles. A vaccine for chickenpox is available for both children and adults. As the immunization rate of children increases, the occurrence of chickenpox will go down and fewer people will be susceptible to develop shingles.

Vaccination - For most adults, who have already had chickenpox, and are susceptible to develop shingles, a vaccine has been licensed for use in Canada to prevent shingles. Routine vaccination is recommended for all persons over 60 years. This vaccine is not publicly funded. Discuss vaccination with your healthcare provider or a Public Health Nurse.

**For more information, contact the Infectious Disease Control Team at
519-663-5317, ext. 2330 or go to www.healthunit.com.**

Information adapted from:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) June 6, 2008 / Vol. 57 / RR-5
"Prevention of Herpes Zoster Recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP)" www.cdc.gov/mmwr

Healthy Ontario. "Shingles". Accessed on September 22, 2008.
http://www.healthyonario.com/ConditionDetails.aspx?disease_id=228

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