



Fact Sheet: Shingles

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information, contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov.

What is shingles?

Shingles (Herpes Zoster) is an infection caused by varicella-zoster virus (VZV), the same virus that causes chickenpox. Anyone who has recovered from chickenpox, can develop shingles because the virus stays inactive within the body and reactivates after having the chickenpox causing shingles. The risk of developing the disease increases with age.

How is it transmitted?

Shingles is less contagious than the chickenpox and cannot be transmitted from one person to another. A person cannot get shingles from someone who has shingles. However, a person can get chickenpox from someone who has shingles if he or she never had chickenpox or never had the chickenpox vaccine. The virus from a patient with shingles may cause chickenpox in someone who has never had chickenpox or has not been vaccinated.

The virus is spread through direct contact with fluid from shingles blisters which appear as a rash or breathing in virus particles from the rash blisters. A person is not infectious to others before the blisters appear or after the rash crusts and scabs develop over the rash. Once crusts/scabs develop over the rash, the person is no longer infectious or contagious.

How can shingles be prevented?

To reduce the risk of contracting shingles

- Avoid being in contact with someone who has the disease
- Avoid contact with pregnant women who never had chickenpox or been vaccinated; premature or low birthweight babies; immunosuppressed, immunocompromised and human immunodeficiency virus, if you have shingles
- Do not touch or scratch the fluid-filled blisters, rash or items that may have been in contact with the blisters such as clothing or towels

- Anyone with a rash, must keep the area covered with a bandage or cloth while around others until scabs appear

It is recommended that healthy adults 50 years and older get the shingles vaccine to protect against the disease. Recombinant zoster vaccine (RZV, Shingrix) is the recommended vaccine for prevention and related complications. If you think you have shingles, contact your doctor immediately about treatment.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

People can have early signs of fever, pain, itching, or tingling in the area where the rash will develop several days before the rash appears. The most common symptom the rash, occurs in a single stripe around the left or the right side of the body. Shingles can also occur on one side of the face sometimes affecting the eye causing vision loss.

Symptoms include:

- Tingling feeling on the skin
- Itchiness
- Stabbing pain
- Fever

- Chills
- Tiredness
- Headache
- Upset stomach

People may have symptoms 1 to 5 days before the rash appears. The rash is painful with fluid-filled blisters that dry and crusts over in, approximately, 7 to 10 days. The rash usually fades away within 2 to 4 weeks.

How is shingles treated?

Most cases of shingles resolve on their own without specific treatment. Several antiviral medicines are available to treat shingles.

- Acyclovir
- Valacyclovir
- Famciclovir

These medicines shorten the length and severity of the illness. They work best when taken as soon as rash appears.

Wet compresses, calamine lotion and warm oatmeal baths may help relieve itching. As stated, earlier,

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Pain relieving medications or anti-itching cream can be used. People who are immunocompromised or pregnant should contact their healthcare provider, especially since antiviral drugs may need to be prescribed.

Are there any complications from shingles?

The most common complication of shingles is long-term nerve pain called postherpetic neuralgia, or PHN. PHN occurs where the shingles rash was located. Pain at the site of the rash may persist for weeks, months or years in older adults because of the nerves involved around the area. There is also a risk of scarring from the blisters and rash. People with weak immune systems may have repeated cases of shingles or have widespread appearance of the rash in multiple areas on the body. Anyone with shingles near the eyes should see a doctor immediately due to the risk of vision loss.