



Shingles (Herpes Zoster)

What is shingles?

Shingles (or herpes zoster) is caused by the varicella-zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox.

Once you have had chickenpox the varicella –zoster virus can stay inactive in your nerve cells and may ‘reactivate’ many years later as shingles. Shingles can only occur in people who have had chickenpox in the past (and very rarely in those who have been immunised against chickenpox).

In most cases shingles occurs for no apparent reason. It is thought that in some people, shingles may be activated by stressful events such as illness or trauma.

What are the symptoms?

Shingles appears as a localised skin rash with painful blisters. Initially the skin feels tender and painful; the skin then turns red and breaks out in tiny fluid filled blisters within 5 days of the pain starting. The blisters then dry up and form a scab or crust over the top.

The rash appears along the band of skin supplied by the affected nerve. It can affect any part of the body, including the face. Usually the rash appears on one side of the chest or stomach.

The rash can last for a few days or weeks. Once the attack is over, the skin usually returns to normal, but in severe cases there can be some scarring.

Can there be complications?

The most serious complication from shingles is persistent chronic pain called post herpetic neuralgia (PHN) which can last for months or years. PHN can have a substantial impact on quality of life and may not respond to treatment.

Other complications include:

- Bacterial infection of the blisters
- Damage to the cornea of the eye, if shingles occurs near the eye
- Nerve palsies
- Pneumonia
- Meningitis

How is shingles spread?

Shingles cannot be spread from one person to the other. However the virus that causes shingles, the varicella-zoster virus, can be spread to another person if they are not immune, which can result in the person developing chicken pox. The most common way the virus is spread is by coming into contact with the fluid from shingles blisters (for example by hugging them or touching any clothes or sheets with the blister fluid on them). Covering the blisters with a dressing may help reduce the risk of passing on the virus to others. Unlike chickenpox, the shingles virus cannot be spread by coughing and sneezing.

If you have shingles, avoid contact with:

- Pregnant women who have never had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine;

- Premature or low birth weight infants; and
- People with weakened immune systems, such as people receiving immunosuppressive medications or undergoing chemotherapy, organ transplant recipients, and people with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection.

How long is a person infectious?

A person is infectious from when the blisters appear until the blisters have all formed dry scabs (usually 7 to 10 days).

Who is most at risk of shingles?

People over the age of 50 years are most at risk, particularly those older than 80 years. Half of all people who live until 85 years could develop shingles.

Shingles also occurs more commonly in people who have medical conditions that affect the immune system or in those who are receiving treatment that impacts on the immune system.

You should speak to your GP for advice if you have not had chickenpox or have not been vaccinated against chickenpox and have had close contact with someone who has shingles.

What is the treatment?

Antiviral medications can help shorten the length and severity of shingles. The medication is most effective if given as soon as possible after the appearance of the rash.

If post herpetic neuralgia develops ask your doctor about treatment options.

Immunisation recommendations

The shingles vaccine is recommended but not funded for those aged 60 years and over. All people aged 70 years old are eligible for a free shingles vaccine. This program was introduced in November 2016 and until 2021 those aged 71-79 years can also have the free vaccine.

Those not eligible under the program can purchase the shingles vaccine on private prescription.

The vaccine is still recommended for those who have had shingles before. However it is not recommended during active shingles or for the treatment of post herpetic neuralgia.

The shingles vaccine is safe for most people aged 70-79 years old, including those with chronic diseases. A few people may be unable to have the vaccine, please speak to your GP for advice.

Are there any side effects from the vaccine?

The most common side effects are mild reactions at the injection site, such as pain, swelling, itching and redness.

The shingles vaccine does not protect everyone, so some people who receive the vaccine may still get the shingles.

Need more information?

For more information about shingles or chickenpox, contact your doctor or call the Communicable Disease Control

Information Line **(02) 6205 2155**
during business hours.

Communicable Disease Control Section
at Health Protection Service *is responsible for the investigation and surveillance of notifiable or infectious conditions in the ACT in order to control or prevent their spread in the community. This includes the promotion of immunisation, education and other strategies that help to limit the spread of diseases.*

Acknowledgements

1. Heymann, D L, 2015, *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual*, 20th edition
2. NCIRS, 2015, *Herpes Zoster Factsheet*
3. NHMRC, 2013, *The Australian Immunisation Handbook*, 10th edition

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Enquiries: Canberra 13ACT1 or 132281