

Shingles (Herpes Zoster)

What is shingles?

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

After having chickenpox, the varicella-zoster virus stays inactive in nerve cells and may 'reactivate' many years later as shingles. Shingles can only occur in people who have had chickenpox infection in the past.

Most cases of shingles occur in people over 50 years of age. Shingles is more common in people with a weakened immune system.

What are the symptoms?

Shingles appears as a painful chickenpox-like rash along a band of skin supplied by the affected nerve. The rash can affect any part of the body, including the face but is usually only on one side. Initially the skin feels tender and painful before becoming red and breaking out in small fluid filled blisters.

The rash generally lasts for 7-10 days before the blisters dry out and form scabs. The skin will usually return to normal, but in severe cases there may be some scarring.

Can there be complications?

Persistent pain and tingling associated with the rash may persist for weeks, months or even years after the rash has cleared. This is called post herpetic neuralgia (PHN). 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; and
- Meningitis.

Can shingles be spread?

Shingles itself cannot be passed from one person to another, however, direct contact with the fluid from the blisters can spread the varicella-virus to cause chickenpox in people who are not immune.

People who are not immune to chickenpox or people at high risk of developing severe chickenpox (such as non-immune pregnant women, infants and people with weakened

immune systems) should avoid close contact with a person with shingles. These people should see their doctor for advice if they have had very close contact with a person with shingles. There are treatments available that may help to prevent or reduce the severity of chickenpox infection in these people if given soon after exposure.

Unlike chickenpox, a person with shingles does not usually spread the virus by coughing and sneezing. Covering the shingles blisters with a dressing may help reduce the risk of passing the virus onto others.

How long is a person infectious?

Varicella-virus is present in the fluid filled blisters and the person is infectious from when the blisters first appear until they have dried out and formed scabs (usually 7-10 days).

There is usually no exclusion period for people with shingles. However, those in occupations who have close contact with people who are at high risk of developing complications from chickenpox may need to be excluded (e.g. health professionals who work with premature infants, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems).

Who is most at risk of shingles?

People of any age can develop shingles, however, it is most common in people over the age of 50 years, particularly those older than 80 years. Shingles also occurs more commonly in people who have medical conditions that weaken the immune system or in those who are receiving treatment to suppress their immune system.

What is the treatment?

Antiviral medication can help shorten the length and severity of shingles. To be effective, treatment should be given as soon as possible after the appearance of the rash, ideally within 24 hours.

Medication for nerve pain may be needed to help manage symptoms if PHN develops. Please see your doctor for treatment advice if you think you may have shingles or PHN.

Immunisation recommendations

The shingles vaccine is routinely offered for free to people at 70 years of age as part of the National Immunisation Program (NIP). In addition, there is a free 'catch up' program offering vaccine to those aged 71-79 years until October 2021.

The vaccine is registered for use in people from 50 years of age. People not eligible for a free vaccine under the NIP (50-69 year olds and those over 80 years) can choose to purchase the shingles vaccine on private prescription.

The vaccine reduces the likelihood of developing both shingles and PHN, although the effectiveness can vary depending on the age at which it is given and protection may wear off over time.

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 PHN. It is suggested that people should wait at least 1 year after an episode of shingles before they receive the vaccine.

Certain people, including those with a weakened immune system or those on certain medications, may be unable to have the vaccine.

Please speak to your doctor about whether the shingles vaccine is suitable for you.

Are there any side effects from the vaccine?

The shingles vaccine is safe and well tolerated by most people for whom it is recommended. The most common side effects are mild reactions at the injection site, such as pain, swelling, itching and redness.

Need more information?

For more information about shingles or chickenpox, contact your doctor or call the Health Protection Service, Communicable Disease Control Information Line during business hours on **(02) 6205 2155**.

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.

Shingles is a notifiable disease. Cases are notified to ACT Health.

Acknowledgements

1. Heymann DL. *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual*. 20th edn. Washington: American Public Health Association, USA; 2015.
2. National Centre for Immunisation Research & Surveillance (NCIRS), Herpes Zoster Fact sheet; August 2017. Available from:
http://ncirs.edu.au/assets/provider_resources/fact-sheets/zoster-vaccine-fact-sheet.pdf
3. Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI). *Australian Immunisation Handbook*, Australian Government Department of Health, Canberra, 2018. Available from:
<https://immunisationhandbook.health.gov.au>

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