

Shingles (Herpes Zoster)

What is shingles?

Shingles is an infection caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. This virus is called varicella zoster. Varicella refers to chickenpox and zoster to shingles. You cannot develop shingles unless you have had a previous infection of chickenpox (usually as a child).

Shingles is most common in people over 60 years of age, but can occur in young people as well.

How does it occur?

After you recover from chickenpox, the chickenpox virus is not destroyed, but goes back to the roots of your nerve cells (near the spinal cord) and becomes dormant, or inactive. Later, when the chickenpox virus is reactivated, the symptoms are called shingles.

What causes the reactivation of the virus is not known. A weakened immune system seems to allow reactivation of the virus. It may become active after trauma to the skin from injury or sunburn. Emotional stress seems to be a common trigger as well. Advancing age, cortisone-type drugs, and the stress of major surgery may trigger shingles. It may also occur with immune-suppressing medications, with another illness, or after major surgery. It is also seen as a complication of cancer or AIDS.

What are the symptoms?

The first sign of shingles is often burning, sharp pain, tingling, or numbness in or under your skin on one side of your body or face. The most common site is the back or upper abdomen. You may have severe itching or aching rather than pain. You also may feel tired and ill with fever, chills, headache, and upset stomach.

After several days, you will notice a rash of small, clear, fluid-filled blisters on reddened skin. Within 3 days after they appear, the blisters will turn yellow, then dry and crust over. Over the next 2 weeks the crusts will drop off, sometimes leaving small, pitted scars.

Because they tend to follow nerve paths, the blisters are usually found in a line, often extending from the back or flank around to the abdomen, just on one side. Shingles never crosses the midline of the body. The word shingles comes from the Latin word for belt or girdle. The rash also may appear on one side of your face. Some people have painful eye inflammations and infections.

Is shingles contagious?

A person with shingles can transmit chickenpox to a person who has never had the virus. There are virus particles in the blister fluid.

Shingles is much less contagious than chickenpox because chickenpox can be spread through the air, whereas spread of shingles occurs only with direct contact or indirect contact (for example, a washcloth) with the blister fluid.

If you have shingles, avoid contact with infants, children, pregnant women, and adults who have never had chickenpox until your blisters are completely dry.

How is shingles diagnosed?

Your doctor will diagnose shingles based on the history of your symptoms and the appearance of the blisters on one side of your body. Your doctor may order lab tests to look for the virus in fluid from a blister.

What is the treatment?

The shingles virus has to run its natural course, but you can get some relief by:

- applying cool compresses
- taking acetaminophen or other mild pain relievers.

Your doctor also may prescribe:

- stronger painkillers for more serious discomfort
- antibacterial salves or lotions to control skin infection
- capsaicin cream for pain
- Anti-viral drugs, to speed recovery and lessen chance of prolonged symptoms from nerve inflammation
- corticosteroids, for people over 50.

To be most effective, the medication should be started as early as possible.

Another reason for medication is to prevent "postherpetic neuralgia." This is a condition of persistent numbness or tingling or pain along the course of the affected nerve that may last for months or even years after the shingles rash. This problem is most likely to occur after a shingles outbreak in a person over 50. The drug is prescribed at the time the shingles is diagnosed and must be taken for 7 days.

How long will the effects last?

The rash from shingles will heal in 1 to 2 weeks and the pain or irritation will usually disappear within 3 to 5 weeks. However, if the virus damages a nerve, you may have pain, numbness, or tingling long after the rash is healed.

Rare effects of shingles include headaches and paralysis of one side of the face (droopy face). Even if you have a severe case, however, your symptoms will all eventually go away, although it may take months or years.

How can I take care of myself?

You should rest in bed during the early stages if you have fever and other symptoms. Your rash may be irritated by contact with clothing or bed linen.

What can be done to prevent shingles?

A vaccine to prevent chickenpox is now available. You also can protect your immune system and lessen your chances of getting shingles by keeping your stress under control.

When should I call my doctor?

You should see your doctor for the initial diagnosis and for age-appropriate treatment. After your initial visit, you should contact your doctor if:

- You develop worsening pain or fever.
- There are signs of bacterial infection of the blisters (for example, increasing pain, redness, or milky-yellow drainage from the blister sites).
- The blisters are close to the eyes.