

SHINGLES (Herpes Zoster)

FACT SHEET

What is shingles?

Shingles is caused by the varicella zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox. After a person recovers from chickenpox, the virus stays inactive in the body. For reasons that are not fully known, the virus can become active again years later, causing shingles. Shingles is also known as herpes zoster.

Who can get shingles?

Anyone who has recovered from chickenpox may develop shingles; however, the risk of shingles increases as you get older. About half of all cases occur in persons 60 years of age and older. The following people have a greater risk of getting shingles: 1) persons with medical conditions that keep their immune systems from working properly, such as certain cancers and human immunodeficiency virus, and 2) people who receive immunosuppressive drugs. People who develop shingles typically have only one episode in their lifetime.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

Shingles is a painful rash that develops on one side of the face or body. The rash forms blisters that typically scab over in 7–10 days and clears up within 2–4 weeks. Before the rash develops, people often have pain, itching, or tingling in the area where the rash will develop. This may happen anywhere from 1–5 days before the rash appears. Other symptoms can include fever, headache, chills, and upset stomach.

How does shingles spread?

Shingles cannot be passed from one person to another. However, the virus that causes shingles (varicella zoster virus) can be spread from a person with active shingles to another person who has never had chickenpox. In such cases, the person exposed to the virus might develop chickenpox, but would not develop shingles. The virus spreads through direct contact with fluid from the rash blisters caused by shingles.

Is there a vaccine for shingles?

Yes. The vaccine can reduce your risk of developing shingles and the long-term pain it can cause. People 60 years of age and older should talk with their health care provider about getting the vaccine.

How is shingles treated?

Several antiviral medicines are available to treat shingles. These medicines help shorten the length and severity of the illness. But to be effective, they must be started as soon as possible after the rash appears. People who have or think they might have shingles should call their health care provider as soon as possible to discuss treatment options. Pain medicines may help relieve the pain caused by shingles. Wet compresses, calamine lotion, and colloidal oatmeal baths may help relieve some of the itching.

How can a person with shingles protect others from getting infected with varicella zoster virus?

A person with shingles cannot spread the virus until the blisters appear. Once the rash has developed crusts, the person is no longer contagious. To protect others from getting the virus you can do the following: 1) keep the rash covered, 2) avoid touching or scratching the rash, and 3) wash your hands frequently with soap and water, scrubbing your hands for at least 20 seconds. Until the rash has developed crusts, it is very important to avoid direct 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.

Where can I get more information?

Information about shingles and other related health topics can be found at www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit www.dchealth.dc.gov or call (202) 442-9371.