

What You Need to Know

What is shingles?

Shingles is a viral infection that causes a painful rash. Shingles is caused by the varicella zoster virus — the same virus that causes varicella (chickenpox). After you've had chickenpox, the virus stays in your body for the rest of your life. Years later, the virus may reactivate as shingles.

Who can get shingles?

Anyone that has had chickenpox can get shingles; however, the risk of shingles increases as you get older. Those with weakened immune systems are also at higher risk of developing shingles.

You cannot get shingles from someone who has shingles. You can get chickenpox from someone who has shingles if you have never had chickenpox or never received the chickenpox vaccine.

About 1 out of every 3 people in the United States will develop shingles in their lifetime. Most people get shingles only once. But it's possible to get it two or more times.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

Shingles symptoms usually affect only a small section on one side of your body. These symptoms may include:

- Pain, burning or tingling
 - Can be intense; depending on the location of the pain, it can sometimes be mistaken for problems with the heart, lungs, or kidneys
- Sensitivity to touch
- A red rash that begins a few days after the pain
 - Most commonly, the rash develops as a stripe of blisters that wraps around either the left or right side of the torso
 - Sometimes the shingles rash occurs around one eye or on one side of the neck or face
- Fluid-filled blisters
 - Typically scab over in 7 to 10 days and fully clears up within 2 to 4 weeks
- Itching

People with shingles cannot spread the virus before their rash blisters appear or after the rash crusts.

Are there complications of shingles?

The most common complication of shingles is long-term nerve pain called postherpetic neuralgia (PHN). PHN occurs in the areas where the shingles rash was, even after the rash clears up. It can last for months or years after the rash goes away. About 10% to 18% of people who get shingles will experience PHN, and the risk of PHN increases with age. Early identification and treatment of shingles can reduce the chance of developing PHN.

Other complications include vision loss, inflammation of the brain (encephalitis), facial paralysis, problems with hearing or balance, skin infections, and scarring.

What is the treatment for shingles?

There are several antiviral medicines available to treat shingles and shorten the length and severity of the illness. These medicines are most effective if you start taking them as soon as possible after the rash appears. If you think you have shingles, contact your healthcare provider as soon as possible to discuss treatment.

Pain medicine, either over-the-counter or through a prescription from your doctor, may help relieve the pain caused by shingles.

Wet compresses, calamine lotion, and colloidal oatmeal baths (a lukewarm bath mixed with ground up oatmeal) may help relieve itching.

How can I protect myself from shingles?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends two doses of recombinant zoster vaccine (RZV, Shingrix) to prevent shingles and related complications in adults 50 years and older. Shingrix is also recommended for adults 19 years and older who have weakened immune systems due to disease or therapy.

Rev. 2/13/2023

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