

What is shingles?

- Shingles (or herpes zoster) is a condition caused by the chickenpox (varicella-zoster) virus.
- Shingles can only occur in people who have previously had chickenpox.
- You cannot get Shingles from Shingle – however you can contract Chicken Pox from Shingles.

When a person recovers from chickenpox, the virus does not completely disappear from the body but stays dormant in the nerves of the spine. However, as a person gets older, it is possible for the virus to reappear in the form of shingles. Shingles is uncommon before the age of 12 years with most cases occurring in people over the age of 40 years.

Most people who have shingles have only one bout of the disease in their lifetime. However, individuals with weakened immune systems such as people with AIDS or cancer may suffer repeated infections.

How do you get shingles?

Shingles usually occurs from inside your own body when the chickenpox virus reactivates. If you have not had chickenpox, you can't get shingles. If you have not had chickenpox, you can be infected with chickenpox from someone who has shingles. This happens if you come in contact with the fluid from shingles blisters.



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Shingles (Herpes - Zoster)



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Symptoms

Early signs of shingles include:

- a burning sensation or stabbing pain and tingling or itching on the skin.
- Headaches
- Tiredness
- Discomfort looking into bright lights

Symptoms can occur for several days before the rash appears. The rash can last about 10 to 15 days. It often makes a stripe or belt-like pattern on one side of the face or body. The rash forms small blisters, which fill with liquid and burst before the skin crusts over and heals. After a few days, a rash or blisters appear usually on one side of the body or face. When the rash is at its peak, symptoms can range from mild itching to extreme and debilitating pain.

Transmission

Direct contact with the fluid in the blisters of the rash may cause chickenpox (but not shingles) in people who have not previously had chickenpox. This is because both diseases are caused by the same virus. In addition to direct contact, shingles can also be spread via the air through coughing and sneezing if the blisters are present in the mouth of the infected person. The rash or blisters usually last from one to 14 days but can be longer.

Treatment

Shingles can be treated with antiviral drugs (eg. acyclovir) but to be effective, treatment must be started within 72 hours of the rash appearing. Most treatment is aimed at reducing the initial pain and rash. Other drugs that may be used to help ease symptoms include pain killers and topical ointments.

Shingles to the upper half of the face may cause serious damage to the eye, and medical treatment should be sought immediately. It is important that the affected skin site be kept clean to avoid secondary bacterial infections. Avoid pricking or scratching the blisters.

Prevention

A safe and effective chickenpox (varicella) vaccine is now available in Australia.

Evidence suggests a reduced incidence of shingles among healthy recipients of the chickenpox vaccine, although currently there is insufficient information to assess long term effects of the vaccine. Vaccination with the chickenpox vaccine is recommended for the following groups of people who have not had chicken pox (non-immune):

- Non-immune people in high risk occupations such as health care workers, teachers, and workers in child-care services .
- Non-immune women prior to pregnancy.
- Non-immune parents of young children
- Non-immune household contacts, both adults and children, of people with weakened immune systems.

Am I Contagious

People with shingles and who have blisters should not have contact with people who have not had chickenpox or who are unsure if they have had chickenpox.

If you have Shingles you can pass on the virus to people who have not had Chicken Pox. You should therefore avoid pregnant women and unvaccinated babies. People with open wounds should avoid contact with the rash area. Once the blisters have healed, the contagious phase is finished.

Are there any long lasting effects?

Some individuals develop a long-lasting pain condition called Postherpetic Neuralgia after having Shingles. Postherpetic Neuralgia is more common in older people. Early treatment of Shingles with an antiviral medication and good adequate pain killers may help prevent the development of Postherpetic Neuralgia.

References

Patient & Visitor Fact Sheet – Shingles. Ref: Queensland Health Shingle fact sheet 2010.

Australian Government. Department of health. May 2020

NSW Health: Patient Fact Sheet – Shingles: June 2019