

SHINGLES

Shingles (also known as herpes zoster) is a painful rash caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. Once you've had chickenpox, the inactive virus can stay in your body for years. As immunity to the virus can decrease over time, the virus can become active again, causing shingles. Although shingles occurs only in people who have had chickenpox, the chickenpox may have been so mild that you or your parents did not realize you had it.

The Chance of Developing Shingles

Between 10–30% of people will develop shingles during their lifetime. The shingles virus can infect all ages, but is much more common in adults aged 50 years and older. The shingles can occur in healthy adults, but you may have a higher chance of having shingles if your immune system is not working well—for example:

- If you have certain cancers or other diseases that interfere with normal immune response
- If you are taking medications that suppress the immune system (e.g., drugs that treat rheumatoid arthritis) or undergoing chemotherapy for cancer
- If you have the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), the virus that causes AIDS.

Shingles Signs and Symptoms

It is important to be aware of the early symptoms of shingles so that you can seek medical care as soon as possible. The most common early symptoms are:

- a rash of blisters on one side of the body in a patch or bandlike pattern, usually affecting the trunk (chest, upper, or lower back), although it can appear near the nose and eye (which can permanently affect your vision if left untreated).
- pain (usually sharp, stabbing, or burning) or unusual sensations (such as itching, stinging, or tingling) on only one side of the body. Several days before a rash appears, the pain may be severe enough to interfere with daily activities, sleep and sexual function.

What Happens Next?

In three to four days after the rash appears, blisters can become open sores or “ulcers” which sometimes become infected. If you are healthy, the sores usually crust over within seven to ten days. The rash generally disappears completely within three to four weeks.

In most people, shingles does not cause any lasting health problems. One complication of shingles, called postherpetic neuralgia, can cause mild to severe pain or unpleasant sensations that can last months, even years. It is most common in people over age 60.

Can I Catch Shingles From Someone Else?

No, but if you've never had chickenpox (or don't think that you have) or have never been vaccinated for chickenpox, you can develop chickenpox (not shingles) after direct (skin to skin) contact with a shingles blister or by inhaling the virus in the air. If you have never had chicken pox or received the chickenpox vaccine, be cautious around anyone with shingles and be sure to get the chickenpox vaccine.

Shingles Can Be Prevented

A vaccine is now available to help prevent shingles and is recommended for most adults 60 years of age and older. For more information, talk to your doctor or nurse about the vaccine.



HOW TO PREVENT SHINGLES

Until recently, there was no way to prevent shingles, a painful rash caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. Unfortunately, many people who develop shingles also can develop postherpetic neuralgia—long-lasting pain or unpleasant sensations from the nerves where the rash occurred. In 2008, the first vaccine, Zostavax™, was approved for use in Canada.

How does the vaccine work?

This vaccine contains a weakened chickenpox virus (varicella-zoster virus) that helps your immune system protect you from getting shingles. Protection against shingles may start as soon as four to six weeks after you receive the vaccine. The vaccine does not protect everyone, but even if you **do** get shingles after being vaccinated, the vaccine may help prevent postherpetic neuralgia. If you've had shingles before, it's not known if the vaccine can prevent you from getting it again.

Who should be vaccinated?

The shingles vaccine is recommended for healthy adults 60 years of age or older. Only one dose of the vaccine is needed. If you're ill and have a fever, wait until you're better before getting the shingles vaccine. Also make sure the person prescribing and administering the vaccine is made aware of all the medicines you are taking (from other doctors, over the counter, etc.) and of all your on-going medical conditions before giving you Zostavax™.

Who should not be vaccinated with vaccine?

If you already have shingles, the vaccine can't be used to treat it. It is also not suitable if you:

- are allergic to gelatin or neomycin
- have a weakened immune system from certain conditions or diseases (e.g., an immune deficiency, cancer, or HIV/AIDS) or from certain medications (e.g., high doses of steroids or some treatments for rheumatoid arthritis, Crohn's disease and severe psoriasis)
- have active or untreated tuberculosis

How well does the vaccine work?

About one in five adults will develop shingles during their lifetime. The largest study of the vaccine found that the risk of having shingles was reduced by about half and the risk of developing postherpetic neuralgia by about two-thirds.

Does the vaccine have any side effects?

The shingles vaccine is very safe. Common reactions include soreness, redness, swelling, itching, or rash where the vaccine was given. Some people may have headaches or swollen lymph glands after receiving the vaccine. More severe reactions are rare.

How much does the vaccine cost?

A single dose of the vaccine costs between \$175-\$195. Right now, the vaccine is not covered by provincial/territorial health plans. Some private health insurance plans may cover the cost. If you have private health insurance, check with your provider.

