

Shingles

What is shingles?

Shingles is a painful skin rash caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. Shingles is also called herpes zoster. This illness is most common in people over 50 years old.

What is the cause?

The virus that causes chickenpox and shingles is called varicella zoster. After you recover from chickenpox, the virus stays in your body but it is inactive. The virus can become active again at any time in your life and cause shingles if your body's immune system is weakened by things like:

- Illness
- Aging
- Chemotherapy or radiation
- Certain medicines, such as steroids

Your risk for getting shingles may be higher if:

- You have been under a lot of stress.
- You have a poor diet.
- You have been sunburned.

Sometimes shingles happens for no known reason.

You cannot have shingles unless you have already had chickenpox, and you cannot get shingles from someone else. However, a person with shingles can transmit chickenpox to a person who has never been exposed to the chickenpox virus. The virus is spread by contact with the blisters. The blisters are no longer contagious after they dry up and form scabs.

What are the symptoms?

The first symptoms may include:

- Burning, sharp pain; tingling; or numbness in your skin on one side of your body, head, or face
- Severe itching or aching
- Feeling tired
- Feeling sick with fever, chills, headache, and upset stomach or belly pain

One to 14 days after you start feeling pain, you will notice a rash of small blisters on reddened skin. Within a few days after the rash appears, the blisters will turn yellow, then dry up and form scabs. Over the next 2 weeks the scabs drop off, and the skin heals over the next several days to weeks.

The blisters are usually found in a path, often extending from the back or side around to the middle of the belly. The blisters are usually on just one side of the

body. They may also appear on one side of your face or scalp. The painful rash may be in the area of your ear or eye. When shingles occurs on the head or scalp, it may cause weakness of one side of the face, making that side of the face look droopy.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine you. The diagnosis is usually obvious from the symptoms and the rash. If your provider wants to confirm the diagnosis, you may have lab tests to look for the virus in fluid from a blister.

How is it treated?

Several medicines can help treat shingles. Your healthcare provider may give you:

- Antiviral medicine to help you heal faster
- Pills or ointment to help relieve pain
- Antibacterial medicine to put on the rash and help prevent bacterial infection of the blisters

For most people the pain of shingles goes away in the first month or two after the blisters heal. If you have shingles on your head or scalp, it may take longer for the pain to go away. Sometimes the virus damages a nerve. This can cause pain, numbness, or tingling for months or even years after the rash is healed and is called postherpetic neuralgia. The older you are when you have shingles, the more likely it is that you will have postherpetic neuralgia. Taking antiviral medicine as soon as shingles is diagnosed may help prevent this problem.

How can I take care of myself?

Here are some things you can do to help relieve pain:

- Take a pain-relief medicine such as acetaminophen. Take other medicine as prescribed by your healthcare provider.
- Put cool, moist washcloths on the rash.
- Try not to let clothing or bed linens rub against the rash and irritate it.

Rest in bed if you have fever and other symptoms of illness.

Ask your healthcare provider:

- How and when you will hear your test results
- How long it will take to recover from this illness
- What activities you should avoid and when you can return to normal activities
- How to take care of yourself at home
- What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them

Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup.

How can I help prevent shingles?

If you have never had chickenpox, you can get a shot to help prevent infection with the chickenpox virus. Most children now get shots to prevent chickenpox.

If you are 50 or older, you can get a different shot that helps prevent shingles. This shot is recommended for people 60 years of age and older. The shingles shot does not always prevent shingles. However, if you do get shingles sometime after you got the shot, you may have less pain. The shingles shot is not used to treat shingles once you have it.

You can also lessen your chances of getting shingles by trying to keep stress under control, exercising regularly, and eating a healthy diet.

If you have shingles, make sure that anyone who has not had chickenpox or the chickenpox shot does not come into close contact with you until the blisters are completely dry. You are no longer contagious after the blisters dry up and form scabs.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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