



SHINGLES (Herpes Zoster)

What is shingles?

Shingles, or herpes zoster, is caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. It occurs only in persons who have had chickenpox in the past. It is a reactivation of a dormant (inactive) varicella infection in the dorsal root ganglia (nerve fibers). This means that someone who has had and recovered from chickenpox may still have inactive virus cells in sensory nerve tissue. Somehow the virus becomes active again, causing lesions to crop up in irregular patterns along nerve pathways. It is estimated that almost 1 out of every 3 people in the United States will develop shingles. Children can get shingles, but the risk for disease increases among older adults and those with weakened immune systems (inability to fight infection).

People who develop shingles typically have only one episode in their lifetime. In rare cases, however, a person can have a second or even a third episode.

What are the symptoms?

The first symptom of shingles is often a tingling feeling on the skin, itchiness or stabbing pain. Within 5 days, a patch of red, raised rash appears. Then, clusters of clear vesicles (small, fluid-filled blisters) develop. At its peak, pain and itchiness may range from mild to intense. The eruptions are said to be unilateral which means they are usually seen on one side of the body, not crossing the midline. The most common areas affected include the chest, abdomen and buttocks. The face, arms, and legs may also be affected if nerves in those areas are involved.

Some individuals may develop post herpetic neuralgia (PHN), very severe pain and numbness. Symptoms may last several weeks or may be result in irreversible neurological damage. Permanent vision loss may occur if the virus affects the eye.

How is shingles spread?

Though chickenpox is one of the most easily transmitted communicable diseases, the same does *not* hold true for shingles. Zoster is much less contagious. *A person exposed to someone with shingles will not get shingles, but may get chickenpox!* Direct contact with fluid from broken blisters or articles freshly contaminated with this fluid may be sources of infection for a week after the appearance of lesions.

How is it treated?

An episode of shingles usually heals on its own within a few weeks, but prompt treatment can ease pain, speed healing and reduce risk of complications. Antiviral drugs may be effective if given early in the course of the illness.

How is shingles prevented?

The shingles vaccine (Zostavax) is recommended for all adults age 60 and older, whether or not they have had chicken pox or shingles in the past. The vaccine doesn't guarantee you won't get shingles, but it will likely reduce the course and severity of the disease.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
SCHD Communicable Disease Unit 330-375-2662
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov
Mayo Clinic www.mayoclinic.com
Minnesota Department of Health www.health.state.mn.us