

SHINGLES

What is shingles?

Shingles is a disease caused by the varicella-zoster virus which is the same virus that causes chickenpox. The chickenpox virus can stay in the nervous system and lay inactive in the body for years. Those who carry the varicella-zoster virus may never show any symptoms of the disease and can live a normal life. Shingles occurs when the varicella-zoster virus reactivates in the body.

This can be caused by disease, stress, or aging which weakens the immune system. Anyone who has ever had chickenpox is at risk for developing shingles, although it occurs most commonly in people over the age of 60.



What are the symptoms of shingles?

The first sign of shingles is a sudden feeling of pain, tingling or burning on one side of the body. It can be quite painful and may not show any visible symptoms for weeks. When the outbreak occurs, the most common symptom is a very red rash that appears as a band or strip on one side of the body. The rash can also appear elsewhere including the hands, neck, face, eyes or ears. The rash will turn into blisters, then dry out, crust over and clear up in 3-4 weeks. If blisters become infected, they need to be treated with antibiotics. Although rare, the blisters can cause scarring, and scarring in the eye can cause blindness. Other symptoms include:

- Joint pain
- Fever and chills
- Headaches
- Hearing loss
- Vision problems

- Loss of eye movement
- Taste problems
- Burning or abdominal pain

Can shingles be spread?

Once you have had chickenpox, you cannot catch shingles from someone else. However, you have the potential to develop shingles later in life because the virus is in your body. If you have never had chickenpox and you are exposed to the virus through direct contact with the fluid from the blisters, you can develop chickenpox, but not shingles.

Is shingles dangerous?

Shingles is usually not life-threatening. People who suffer from shingles mostly complain about constant pain from the outbreaks. However, for people with compromised immune systems, such as patients with HIV/AIDS, auto immune disorders or on chemotherapy, the skin infections can be more severe and dangerous.

Is there a treatment for shingles?

There is no cure for shingles, but there are medications to manage the outbreak. Doctors may prescribe pain medication to ease the pain. Antiviral drugs are used to shorten the outbreaks and severity.

Can shingles be prevented?

A shingles vaccine (Zostavax) is recommended for those 60 and older to reduce the risk of developing shingles.

For more information on shingles, its symptoms and treatment options:

Center for Disease Control www.cdc.gov/shingles