

Environmental Health & Prevention Services

ZOSTAVAX®

What is shingles?

Shingles is an illness caused by the varicella zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox. **You can only get shingles if you have previously had chickenpox.** After you have chicken pox, the varicella zoster virus rests in the body's nerves permanently. When the virus is reactivated (i.e. in times of stress) you get shingles.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

The symptoms are pain and a rash with blisters that scab after 3 to 5 days. The most frequently mentioned symptom is pain. The rash and pain usually occur in a band on one side of the body, or clustered on one side of the face. The rash usually clears in 2 to 4 weeks. Before the rash develops, there is often pain, itching or tingling in the area where the rash will develop. Other symptoms of shingles can include fever, headache, chills and upset stomach.

Who can get shingles?

About 15-20% of people who have had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine are at risk of having at least one reactivation of the varicella zoster virus, resulting in shingles. About 90% of the population has had chickenpox at some time in their life.

Most cases of shingles occur in people over 50 years of age. The risk for developing shingles is higher in people whose immune system is weakened.

What are possible complications from shingles?

For about 1 in 5 people, severe pain can continue even after the rash clears up, a situation called post-herpetic neuralgia (PHN).

As people get older they are more likely to develop PHN, and it is more likely to be severe and long lasting. The pain may be sharp or throbbing, and it may extend beyond the area of the original rash. The skin may be unusually sensitive to touch and changes in temperature. PHN can last for months, or even years.

Very rarely, shingles can lead to pneumonia, hearing problems, blindness, scarring, brain inflammation (encephalitis), or death.

Can you prevent shingles?

Zostavax® is a vaccine that can help prevent shingles. **It is approved for use in Canada for people 50 years of age or older.** The vaccine has been shown to prevent 50% of shingle cases and reduce the risk of PHN by two-thirds. The vaccine has also been shown to help people who get shingles to have milder episodes of the disease.

What kind of vaccine is Zostavax®?

Zostavax® is a live, attenuated vaccine. This means the live, disease-producing virus was modified or weakened in the laboratory to produce an organism that can grow and produce immunity in the body without causing illness.

How is the vaccine given?

The vaccine is given by a subcutaneous injection, usually in the back of the upper arm.

Who should get this vaccine?

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommended that all adults age 50 years and older receive one dose of zoster vaccine.

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Who should NOT get this vaccine?

People who are allergic to **neomycin, gelatin** or any other component of the vaccine.

People who have a weakened immune system caused by treatments such as radiation, chemo therapy or corticosteroids; or people with conditions such as HIV/AIDS or cancer of the lymph, bone or blood.

People with active, untreated tuberculosis.

What about pregnant women?

Pregnant women should **NOT** receive this vaccine. In addition, people who are in close contact with a pregnant women who has not had chickenpox should talk to their healthcare provider before receiving the Zostavax[®] vaccine.

What side effects have been reported with Zostavax[®]?

The most common reported side effects in people receiving Zostavax[®] were mild, such as redness, pain, tenderness, swelling and itchiness at the injection site and headache.

Can a person who has received the vaccine infect others with the virus?

No. It is safe to be around infants and young children, pregnant women, or people with weakened immune systems after receiving Zostavax[®]. Some people who get Zostavax[®] will develop a chickenpox-like rash near the place where they were vaccinated. As a precaution, this rash should be covered until it disappears.

Severe reactions are rare. However, you should wait 15 minutes after your injection before leaving.

Report any severe reaction to your health care provider or to Community Health Services Department.