

Environmental Health & Prevention Services

Shingles

What Causes It?

Shingles, also called herpes zoster, is an infection caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. After recovering from chickenpox, the virus may remain inactive within cells of the sheath surrounding a large nerve. Years later, it may emerge as shingles. Shingles affects only the area of the body served by the nerve that held the dormant virus.

Factors such as age, illness, medications, or stress can make the virus active again. Older adults and people with weakened immune systems are more likely to get shingles. Shingles are not contagious among people with normal immune systems.

How Does It Spread?

People with shingles are contagious to persons who have not had chickenpox. Therefore, people who have not had chickenpox can catch chickenpox if they have close contact with the liquid from the blisters of a person who has shingles. However, you can not catch shingles itself from someone else. Shingles is caused by the chickenpox virus which has been dormant (staying quiet) in your body ever since you had the chickenpox. You get shingles from your own chickenpox virus, not from someone else. Shingles usually develops when the immune system is compromised.

Shingles usually clears up in a month. There may be severe pain that improves when the rash heals, or continues for months or years. Persistent, on-going pain occurs in half the people over age 60 who develop shingles. Destruction of the nerve sheath caused by shingles exposes the nerve, which continues to send painful messages from the skin to the brain.

What Are the Symptoms?

Early symptoms may include sensations of burning, tingling, or itching. When the virus reaches the skin, pain, a rash, and blisters occur.

Only one side of the body is affected. The rash and blisters may appear on the chest, back, face, inside the mouth, down an arm or leg, or anywhere in a localized area or band on one side of the body. A painful rash or blisters on both sides of the body is not shingles. Shingles can occur in the eye. Any pain in the eye requires prompt medical evaluation to prevent eye infection or blindness.

What Can I Do?

Seek medical care at the first indication you may have shingles. Early treatment may reduce the severity of the infection and also decrease the length and severity of pain after the rash.

What is the Treatment?

Treatment for shingles includes:

- anti-viral drugs to reduce the intensity of the infection
- anti-inflammatory drugs to ease inflammation, and;
- antihistamine drugs to relieve the itching
- prescription pain relievers and anti-depressant drugs to reduce pain and depression

The following comfort measures can be done at home:

- apply cool, wet compresses over the blistered areas
- apply a soothing lotion
- take medications for pain and itching as prescribed by a healthcare provider



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