

SHINGLES

What is shingles?

Shingles, also known as herpes zoster, is an infectious disease caused by the varicella zoster virus (VZV) which is the same virus that causes chickenpox. After a person recovers from chickenpox, the virus stays inactive in their body and can be reactivated in their body later in life.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

Shingles causes a painful rash formed by blisters that usually develops in a single stripe around one side of the face or body. Before the rash develops, people often have pain, itching, or tingling in the area where the rash will be. Other symptoms can include fever, headache, chills and upset stomach.

How is shingles spread?

Shingles cannot be passed from one person to another; however, the virus that causes shingles can spread from a person with active shingles to cause chickenpox in someone who had never had chickenpox or received chickenpox vaccine. People who have not had chickenpox or been vaccinated against chickenpox can get infected through direct contact with fluid from the blisters of a person with active shingles. People with shingles cannot spread the virus before their blisters appear or after their rash has developed crusts.

How long are people contagious?

If you haven't had chickenpox or been vaccinated against chickenpox, you can get the virus from contact with someone who has shingles blisters. The virus doesn't spread after the blisters have formed crusty scabs. Shingles blisters usually scab over in 7-10 days and disappear completely in 2-4 weeks.

Who gets shingles?

Anyone who has recovered from chickenpox can develop shingles. Even children can get shingles; however, the risk of shingles increases as you get older. People with weakened immune systems have a higher risk of getting shingles. Most people get only one episode of shingles in their lives; however, it is possible to have a second or even third episode.

What treatment is available for people with shingles?

Several antiviral medicines are available to treat shingles and shorten the length and severity of illness. People with shingles should start taking those medicines as soon as possible. There are also pain medicines and lotions and other products to help relieve some of the itching.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work or daycare?

Since shingles is less contagious than chickenpox and the risk of a person with shingles spreading the virus is low, if you can keep the rash well covered, you can attend work or school. If you have shingles you should wash your hands often to prevent the spread of the zoster virus and avoid contact with pregnant women who have never had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine, premature or low birth weight infants, and people with weakened immune systems until your rash has crusted over completely.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting shingles?

Vaccination against chickenpox can prevent the virus that causes shingles from developing in your body. The way to reduce your own risk of developing shingles if you have had chickenpox is to get vaccinated against shingles. Healthy adults 50 years and older should get 2 doses of the shingles vaccine called Shingrix® which protects against shingles and the possible complications caused by the disease including severe pain in the areas where the shingles rash developed after the rash clears up (called postherpetic neuralgia) which may be severe and can last for weeks to many years and be debilitating. Other possible serious complications from shingles can involve the eye and include loss of vision. Other rare complications include pneumonia, brain inflammation (encephalitis), or death.