

Shingles (Herpes Zoster)

What is shingles?

Shingles, or herpes zoster, is a painful rash caused by the chickenpox virus. The chickenpox virus is also called varicella-zoster. Most people get chickenpox as a child. When the infection is over, the virus stays in the body. Your immune system may weaken as you get older, allowing the chickenpox virus to become active again. This can cause shingles. Most people get it when they are older than 50 years. You can also get it if your immune system is weak from a disease, like HIV infection.

What are the symptoms?

You might have an odd feeling or pain in your skin before a rash appears. The rash may be painful or itchy. Shingles can also cause fever or headache, and light might bother your eyes.

The rash begins as groups of small red bumps. It almost always happens on one side of the body, often on the back. After a few days, the red bumps turn into blisters filled with fluid. The blisters eventually scab over and heal.

How is it treated?

Your doctor may prescribe medicines to make the symptoms less severe and the rash go away

faster. They work best if started during the first 72 hours of the rash.

What is postherpetic neuralgia?

It is when you have pain in the same area as the rash, even after the rash is gone. It may last for weeks to months.

Over-the-counter pain relievers like acetaminophen (one brand: Tylenol) and ibuprofen (one brand: Motrin) might help. Your doctor may also prescribe stronger medicine for the pain.

Can shingles be prevented?

There is a vaccine for shingles. It is recommended for most people who are 60 years or older. You only need one dose in your lifetime, and it is safe to give at the same time as other vaccines.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Education Resource
<http://familydoctor.org/574.xml>

June 2011

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

This information provides a general overview and may not apply to everyone. Talk to your family doctor to find out if this information applies to you and to get more information on this subject. Copyright © 2011 American Academy of Family Physicians. Individuals may photocopy this material for their own personal reference, and physicians may photocopy for use with their own patients. Written permission is required for all other uses, including electronic uses.

