

Shingles

(Herpes Zoster, Acute Posterior Ganglioinitis)
Information Sheet

What is Shingles?

Shingles is an acute infection caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox (varicella zoster). The virus that causes chickenpox remains inactive in the body's nerve tissue.

Who gets Shingles?

To develop shingles, a person must have already had chickenpox in his/her lifetime. Shingles can occur at any age but is most common after age fifty (50). Periods of illness, skin trauma such as sunburn or stress may also cause shingles to occur. One case of shingles should provide immunity against further attacks. Shingles is more common in people with weakened immune systems (e.g. HIV, cancer, high dose steroids); these people are also at greater risk for developing shingles more than once.

What are the symptoms?

Often, the first symptom is pain along the nerve where the shingles will develop. In 2 to 3 days, a rash with fluid filled blisters will develop in the same area, and there may be a fever and a headache. Over the next 5 to 12 days (average 7 days), the blisters crust over and begin to heal.

Most people recover without difficulty, although they may experience scarring of the skin and, occasionally, pain. A longer recovery may be due to other reasons and should be investigated further by the physician.

Is Shingles contagious?

People with shingles who are otherwise healthy spread the virus in the fluid from the blisters. People with weakened immune systems may also spread the virus through their respiratory tract, by coughing or sneezing. In both cases, the virus sheds until the blisters begin to crust over.

Exposure to shingles does not cause shingles. However, someone who has never had chickenpox could develop chickenpox if exposed to shingles.

What should I do if I am diagnosed with Shingles?

Protect high-risk individuals from exposure (i.e. non-immune infants, pregnant women, and people with low immunity) by covering the blisters with gauze dressing until they are crusted over.

- People with weakened immune systems, who may be spreading the virus through their respiratory tract, should remain at home until all the blisters have crusted over.
- Disinfect any articles used by someone with shingles, and properly dispose of discharge from nose and lesions.
- See a physician for pain and anti-viral medication.
- Administer Varicella Zoster Immune Globulin (VZIG) to susceptible high-risk individuals within 96 hours of exposure.