THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT HERPES ZOSTER

What is herpes zoster?
- Herpes zoster, commonly known as shingles, is a painful skin rash caused by the varicella zoster virus.
- Varicella zoster virus is the same virus that causes chickenpox. A person who had had chickenpox is at risk for herpes zoster because the virus lies dormant in the nerve cell and can reactivate later in life.
- Herpes zoster can occur at any age, but it is most common among people 50 years of age and older.
- People who have medical conditions or take medications that suppress their immune system are at increased risk for herpes zoster.

What are the symptoms?
- Painful, itchy tingling skin and rash with blisters.
- Rash is usually limited to a small area on one side of the body, usually on the trunk or face, and lasts for 2 to 4 weeks.
- Symptoms can include a general feeling of being unwell, headache, chills.

How is herpes zoster diagnosed?
- Your doctor will diagnose herpes zoster after performing a physical examination and analyzing your symptoms. Sometimes laboratory tests are performed to confirm the diagnosis.
- Your doctor may consult with a specialist who has special knowledge of diagnosing and treating complications of herpes zoster.

How is it treated?
- Three orally administered antiviral drugs are approved in the United States for treatment of herpes zoster in healthy patients: famciclovir, valacyclovir, and acyclovir.
- Treatment is shown to reduce the duration of pain and accelerate the healing of the rash.
- Early treatment may reduce the risk for complications.

What are the complications?
- The main complication is pain called postherpetic neuralgia that lasts after the rash heals.
- Postherpetic neuralgia causes severe skin sensitivity, called allodynia, which is described as a burning or sharp pain or itchiness in the area where the herpes zoster rash appeared. It can sometimes be severe enough that it disrupts sleep and makes everyday activities difficult.
- Herpes zoster can also cause other serious complications, including vision loss; ear pain; and inflammation of the spinal cord, which causes weakness in legs and arms and back pain.

Can herpes zoster be prevented?
- A live vaccine to prevent herpes zoster is available.
- The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommends a dose for most adults ≥60 years of age who have a good immune system.
- Without vaccination, approximately one third of healthy adults have an episode of herpes zoster during their lifetime; risk increases with age.
- The herpes zoster vaccination also prevents postherpetic neuralgia.

For More Information

Information on herpes zoster, available in pamphlet form from the American Academy of Dermatology.

Information on varicella vaccination and herpes zoster vaccination from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/shingles/shingles.htm
Information on herpes zoster from the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke.

Information on varicella and on herpes zoster and postherpetic neuralgia from the Varicella Zoster Virus Research Foundation.