

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT HERPES ZOSTER

In the Clinic
Annals of Internal Medicine

What Is Herpes Zoster?

Herpes zoster is a virus that can cause a very painful red rash and other symptoms. The rash is commonly known as shingles. Anyone who had chickenpox as a child can get shingles. Many people have the chickenpox virus in their body but don't know it. You can get shingles when the chickenpox virus becomes active again.

What Are the Symptoms?

- Pain, discomfort, or sensitivity of the skin. These symptoms may happen before a rash develops.
- A very painful or itchy rash, usually on one side of your body or face
- Rash that is very sensitive to touch and looks like red blisters
- Feeling tired or not well

What Are the Risk Factors?

There is usually no clear cause of shingles. However, you are at greater risk if you:

- Had chickenpox as a child
- Are aged 60 years or older
- Have a weakened immune system
- Have HIV/AIDS, diabetes, or cancer
- Are currently getting chemotherapy or radiation
- Use steroids
- Are female
- Are white
- Have a family history of shingles
- Had chickenpox before you were 1 year old

How Is It Diagnosed?

- Your health care professional will ask you about your health history and current symptoms. He or she can usually tell if you have shingles on the basis of your symptoms.
- He or she will give you a physical examination and look at the rash on your body.
- In some cases, you might need a blood test to confirm shingles.



How Is It Treated?

- Medicines called antivirals are used to treat shingles. They help your body fight off the virus.
- Shingles is painful. Over-the-counter medicines like acetaminophen (Tylenol) and ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil) can help.
- If the pain is very bad, ask your health care professional if there are other medicines that can help.

How Can It Be Prevented?

There are 2 types of vaccines for shingles. Ask your health care professional which one is best for you. Being vaccinated is important to reduce the risk for shingles. You should get a shingles vaccine if you are aged 50 years or older.

Questions for My Doctor

- I had chickenpox when I was a child. Could I get shingles?
- I received the chickenpox vaccine as a child. Do I still need the shingles vaccine?
- Am I at risk for shingles?
- Should I get the shingles vaccine?
- Does the vaccine have side effects?
- Besides getting the vaccine, how can I prevent shingles?
- Is it contagious?
- I have already had shingles. Do I still need the vaccine?

For More Information



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov/shingles/index.html

Department of Health and Human Services

www.vaccines.gov/diseases/shingles/index.html

Medline Plus

<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/000858.htm>