

THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT HERPES ZOSTER

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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

www.aad.org/public/publications/pamphlets/viral_herpes_zoster.html
Information on herpes zoster, available in pamphlet form from the American Academy of Dermatology.

www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/varicella/default.htm
www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/shingles/default.htm
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.

www.vzvfoundation.org/chickenpox.html
www.vzvfoundation.org/shingles.html
Information on varicella and on herpes zoster and postherpetic neuralgia from the Varicella Zoster Virus Research Foundation.

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