

Shingles (Herpes Zoster)

What is shingles?

Shingles, also called herpes zoster, is a disease caused by the varicella zoster virus (VZV), the same virus that causes chickenpox (varicella). After a person recovers from chickenpox, the virus stays in their body. Later, the virus can reactivate and cause shingles.

Shingles is a painful rash that consists of blisters and usually only affects one side of the body. The blisters typically scab over in 7 to 10 days and clear up within 2 to 4 weeks. People may notice pain, itching, or tingling 1 to 5 days before the rash appears.

How is shingles spread?

A person with shingles cannot spread shingles to another person. However, a person who has never had chickenpox or has never received the varicella vaccine can get chickenpox from someone who has shingles. The virus is spread through direct contact with fluid from the blisters of the rash. A person is infectious while blisters are present until all blisters have scabbed over.

Persons with localized shingles should keep the rash covered, avoid touching the rash, wash their hands often, and avoid contact with individuals who may be at high risk for serious complications from chickenpox, such as infants, pregnant people, or individuals with weakened immune systems, until their rash has scabbed over.

Should someone with shingles stay home from work or school?

In general, as long as the lesions can be covered, a person with shingles does not need to stay home from work or school. Health care workers and others working with high-risk individuals should remain home from work until the blisters have scabbed over. Anyone who cannot keep their blisters covered should stay home from work or school until all blisters have scabbed over.

How can you prevent shingles?

Vaccination is the only way to reduce the chance of getting shingles, since the virus that causes shingles is already present in anyone who has had chickenpox.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends two doses of recombinant zoster vaccine (RZV, Shingrix®) to prevent shingles and related complications in adults 50 years and older. Shingrix is also recommended for adults 19 years and older who have weakened immune systems because of disease or treatments they are receiving. The varicella vaccine protects against chickenpox (varicella).

How is shingles diagnosed?

Health care providers may diagnose shingles based on symptoms. However, shingles can sometimes be confused with herpes simplex virus, or other rash illnesses. Shingles can be more difficult to diagnose in young children or people with compromised immune systems. To confirm the diagnosis, samples from the rash blisters or scabs can be tested to see if the varicella zoster virus is present.

Is there a treatment for shingles?

There are antiviral medications available to shorten the length of disease and reduce symptom severity. It is important that these medications are started as soon as possible after the rash first appears. Contact your health care provider right away if you think you may have shingles.

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