

Key Messages:

- Shingles is a painful rash illness which appears as crops of small blisters.
- Shingles is one of the diseases caused by the varicella zoster virus (VZV), the same virus that causes chickenpox. After a person has had chickenpox, the virus may reappear later as shingles.
- People who have not had chickenpox or have not received the chickenpox vaccine may get chickenpox from someone who has shingles.
- People with shingles should keep the rash covered, avoid touching or scratching the rash, and wash their hands often to prevent the spread of the virus.

What are the symptoms?

Shingles causes a painful, blistering rash. Other symptoms can include fever, headache, chills, and upset stomach. Before the rash develops, itching, tingling or pain may occur in the area. The rash begins with raised reddish bumps which become blisters. It usually appears only on one side of the body. The blisters crust over and fall off after 7 to 10 days. Some people continue to have pain even after the rash is gone.

How is shingles spread?

Shingles cannot be passed from one person to another. However, the virus that causes shingles can cause chickenpox in someone who has never had chickenpox through touching the rash. A person with shingles can spread the virus when the rash is in the blister-phase. Once the rash has developed crusts, the person is no longer contagious.

What can be done to prevent spread of the virus?

Avoid touching the rash area. You can also prevent spread by washing sheets and clothing of infected person in hot soapy water daily, and washing hands often when around someone with shingles.

Who can get shingles?

Anyone who has recovered from chickenpox may develop shingles, including children. It is more common in people 50 years old and older. The risk of getting shingles increases as a person gets older. People with certain conditions that affect the immune system or people on immunosuppressive drugs such as steroids or drugs given after organ transplantation are at a greater risk of developing shingles.

What is the treatment for shingles?

Several antiviral medicines are available to treat shingle, such as acyclovir (Zovirax), valacyclovir (Valtrex), and famciclovir (Famvir). These medications must be ordered by a physician, and should be started as soon as possible. Treatment will help to shorten how long the illness lasts and how severe the illness is. Your physician may also prescribe pain medicine to help with pain caused by shingles.

There is now a shingles vaccine for people 50 years of age and older.

Ask your physician about this vaccine.

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