

Shingles

Almost 1 out of every 3 people in the United States will develop shingles, also known as zoster or herpes zoster. There are an estimated 1 million cases each year in this country. Anyone who has recovered from chickenpox may develop shingles; even children can get shingles. However the risk of disease increases as a person gets older. About half of all cases occur among men and women 60 years old or older.

About half of all shingles cases occur among men and women age 60 years and older. People who have medical conditions that keep their immune systems from working properly, such as certain cancers, including leukemia and lymphoma, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and people who receive immunosuppressive drugs, such as steroids and drugs given after organ transplantation are also at greater risk of getting shingles.

People who develop shingles typically have only one episode in their lifetime. In rare cases, however, a person can have a second or even a third episode.

Cause

Shingles is caused by the varicella zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox. After a person recovers from chickenpox, the virus stays in the body in a dormant (inactive) state. For reasons that are not fully known, the virus can reactivate years later, causing shingles. Herpes zoster is not caused by the same virus that causes genital herpes, a sexually transmitted disease.

Shingles usually starts as a painful rash on one side of the face or body. The rash forms blisters that typically scab over in 7–10 days and clears up within 2–4 weeks.

Before the rash develops, there is often pain, itching, or tingling in the area where the rash will develop. This may happen anywhere from 1 to 5 days before the rash appears.

Most commonly, the rash occurs in a single stripe around either the left or the right side of the body. In other cases, the rash occurs on one side of the face. In rare cases (usually among people with weakened immune systems), the rash may be more widespread and look similar to a chickenpox rash. Shingles can affect the eye and cause loss of vision.

Other symptoms of shingles can include:

- Fever
- Headache
- Chills
- Upset stomach

Prevention

The only way to reduce the risk of developing shingles and the long-term pain that can follow shingles is to get vaccinated. A vaccine for shingles is licensed for persons aged 60 years and older. For more information about preventing shingles, visit the [Vaccination page](#).

Treatment

Several antiviral medicines—acyclovir, valacyclovir, and famciclovir—are available to treat shingles. These medicines will help shorten the length and severity of the illness. But to be effective, they must be started as soon as possible after the rash appears. Thus, people who have or think they might have shingles should call their healthcare provider as soon as possible to discuss treatment options.

Analgesics (pain medicine) may help relieve the pain caused by shingles. Wet compresses, calamine lotion, and colloidal oatmeal baths may help relieve some of the itching.