

Communicable Diseases

Zostavax (Shingles) Vaccine

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What is shingles (also called herpes zoster or zoster)?

Shingles is an illness caused by the Varicella Zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox. You can only get shingles if you have had chickenpox before. This is because after you have chickenpox, the Varicella Zoster virus rests in the body's nerves permanently. When the virus is reactivated, you get shingles.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

The symptoms are pain and a rash with blisters that scab over in three to five days. The rash is usually in a band on one side of the body, or clustered on one side of the face. The rash usually clears in two to four weeks. Before the rash develops, there is often pain, itching, or tingling in the area where the rash will develop. Other symptoms of shingles can include fever, headache, chills, and upset stomach.

How is shingles treated?

It is important to seek medical treatment as soon as possible after the rash appears. There are several antiviral medications available to treat shingles. Treatment will help shorten the length and severity of the illness. Antiviral treatment is most effective if given within 24 to 72 hours of the appearance of the rash. Pain medication may also help with pain caused by shingles.

Who can get shingles?

About 15-20% of people who have had chickenpox are at risk of having at least one reactivation of the Varicella Zoster virus, resulting in shingles. Most cases of shingles occur in people over 50 years of age. The risk for developing shingles is higher in people whose immune system is weakened. This might be due to aging, disease like cancer or HIV, drugs such as steroids or chemotherapy, or from psychological stress.

Research is starting to show that people immunized with the Varicella vaccine have a lower risk and milder cases of shingles than those who had chickenpox illness.

Can you spread shingles?

Yes and no. Someone with shingles cannot give shingles to anyone else. However, someone with active shingles can spread the virus to a person who has never had chickenpox through direct contact with the rash. The person exposed would develop chickenpox, not shingles. A person is not infectious before blisters appear, only after they appear.

Until the blisters have developed crusts, a person with shingles is contagious. For this reason, it is important to:

- cover the rash
- do not to touch or scratch the rash
- wash your hands often to prevent the spread of the Varicella Zoster virus.

Are shingles serious?

Rarely, shingles can lead to pneumonia, hearing problems, blindness, scarring, brain inflammation (encephalitis), or death.

Severe pain can continue even after the rash clears up for about one in five cases of shingles. This pain is called post-herpetic neuralgia. People affected report burning, throbbing, aching, stabbing, or shooting pain. It can last for months or years. As people get older, they are more likely to develop post-herpetic neuralgia, and it is more likely to be severe. It is difficult to treat.

How often can a person get shingles?

Although it is rare, a person can get shingles two or even three times.

(over)

Can you prevent shingles?

The only way of preventing shingles is a new vaccine called Zostavax. It was first approved for use in Canada in 2008 for people 60 years old and older, and in 2011 was approved for people 50 years and older. The vaccine has been shown to prevent 50% of shingle cases and reduce the risk of post-herpetic neuralgia by two-thirds. The vaccine has also been shown to help people who get shingles to have milder episodes of the disease.

There is some evidence that shows a diet high in fruits and vegetables and a stress free life style also decreases the risk of developing shingles.

Who should I talk to if I have any more questions about the Zostavax vaccine?

Talk to your family health care provider or the Huron County Health Unit (519-482-3416) for more information.

The Zostavax vaccine is not publicly funded and is not given at the health unit.

Your Record of Protection

After you or your child receives any immunization, make sure the health care provider updates the yellow personal Immunization Record card. Keep it in a safe place!