

Shingles

Frequently Asked Questions



What is Shingles?

Shingles, also known as Herpes zoster, is caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox (varicella). After a person is infected with the varicella zoster virus (VZV), the virus remains dormant (inactive) in the body. The virus can then reactivate causing shingles, a localized painful rash.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of shingles can include:

- Pain, itching, or tingling in the area where the rash will develop.
- 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.
- The rash occurs in a single line around either the left or the right side of the body and in some

cases, the rash occurs on one side of the face.

- The most frequent debilitating complication of shingles is post-herpetic neuralgia (PHN), persistent pain at the site of the rash after it has resolved.
- Shingles can also affect the eye and cause loss of vision.

How does it spread?

Shingles cannot be passed from one person to another. However, someone with active shingles can spread VZV to a person who has never had chickenpox or the varicella vaccine. As a result, the person exposed to the virus might develop chickenpox, but they would not develop shingles. A person with shingles can spread the virus when the rash is in the blister-phase. Once the rash develops crusts or if the person has been on an antiviral for 24 hours, s/he is no longer contagious. Those with shingles are encouraged to keep the rash covered, not to scratch the rash, and to frequently wash hands to prevent disease transmission.

Who is at risk of developing shingles?

People who are 50 years and older, and people with no zoster vaccine. Also, people with weakened immune systems due to a chronic condition (e.g., cancer, HIV, organ transplant, etc.) or use of medication that suppresses the immune system (e.g., oral steroids) are also at higher risk.

How is it diagnosed and treated?

A physician can diagnose shingles by scraping a lesion and testing the sample. Antiviral medication will help shorten the length and severity of the illness, but it must be started as soon as the rash appears in order for it to be effective. Your doctor may also prescribe you medication to control the pain from the shingles rash.

What should I do if I think I have it?

If you think that you have shingles you should contact your doctor.

How is it prevented?

A vaccine is available to people 50 years and older to reduce the risk of developing shingles and the long-term pain that can follow shingles.

For more information contact your doctor, refer to <http://www.phila.gov/Health/> or contact the Philadelphia Department of Public Health, Division of Disease Control at 215-685-6740.

