

## Shingles (Varicella Zoster)

### What is shingles?

Shingles is an infection caused by the reactivation of varicella-zoster (chickenpox) virus within the body of someone who previously had chickenpox. The virus remains hidden in the body after chickenpox infection for many years and reoccurs later as shingles.

### Who is at risk for shingles?

Although it is most common in people older than 50, if you have had chickenpox, you are at risk for developing shingles. Shingles is also more common in people with weakened immune systems from HIV infection, chemotherapy or radiation treatment, transplant operations, and stress. Receiving a shingles vaccine reduces the risk of developing the disease.

### What are the symptoms of shingles?

Shingles causes blisters and red bumps, usually in a narrow area on half of the body. The rash may also occur on one side of the face. Shingles on the face can affect the eye and cause vision loss. In rare cases (usually in people with weakened immune systems), the rash may be more widespread on the body and look similar to a chickenpox rash. The lesions may be severely itchy and/or painful. The most common complication of shingles is long-term nerve pain called postherpetic neuralgia (PHN). PHN occurs in the areas where the shingles rash was, even after the rash clears up. It can last for months or years after the rash goes away. The pain from PHN can be so severe and debilitating that it interferes with daily life. About 10 to 18% of people who get shingles will experience PHN. Your risk of PHN increases with age. An older adult with shingles is more likely to develop PHN and have longer lasting and more severe pain than a younger person with shingles. People younger than 40 rarely experience PHN.

### How soon do symptoms appear?

Shingles usually occurs many years after a person has had chickenpox. Shingles may also occur 14 to 16 days after exposure to a rash, with a range of 10 to 21 days.

### How is shingles spread?

Shingles is spread through direct contact with the blisters of an infected person. Shingles can cause chickenpox in people who have not been vaccinated or who have not had chickenpox.

### When and for how long is a person able to spread the disease?

A person is able to spread the virus one to two days before and until the blisters are covered with scabs.

### How is a person diagnosed?

A health care provider will diagnose shingles. Sometimes a laboratory test is needed.

## What is the treatment?

The severity of shingles and how long the infection lasts can be significantly reduced if you are treated immediately with antiviral drugs. Antiviral drugs also may help prevent the painful after-effects of shingles. Other treatments may also be used to treat the symptoms of shingles.

## Does past infection make a person immune?

No.

## Should children or others be excluded from child care, school, work or other activities if they have shingles?

No, unless the rash cannot be covered. Children and staff who are excluded may return after the rash has crusted. If the child is unable to participate in routine activities, the child should be excluded until well.

If shingles occurs in a healthcare setting, please follow infection control recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Recommendations are available at [www.cdc.gov/shingles/hcp/hc-settings.html](http://www.cdc.gov/shingles/hcp/hc-settings.html).

## What can be done to prevent the spread of shingles disease?

1. Everyone ages 50 and older are recommended to be vaccinated against shingles. Two vaccines are licensed in the United States and recommended by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) to prevent shingles. Zoster vaccine live (ZVL, Zostavax®) has been used since 2006. Recombinant zoster vaccine (RZV, Shingrix®) has been used since 2017, and is recommended by ACIP as the preferred shingles vaccine. Shingrix® vaccine is given as two doses at least two to six months apart. People who were previously vaccinated with Zostavax®, previously had shingles, or are unsure if they have had chickenpox should be vaccinated with Shingrix®.
2. If you have shingles, avoid touching the rash. Also, make sure that the rash is covered.
3. Good hand washing is an effective way to prevent the spread of shingles.
4. People who have not previously had chickenpox or who have not been vaccinated against chickenpox should contact their health care provider to be vaccinated. Vaccination against chickenpox within three to five days after exposure to shingles may prevent the disease from occurring.
5. Pregnant women or people with weakened immune systems who have not previously had chickenpox or who have not been vaccinated and who are exposed to shingles should notify their healthcare provider immediately.

## Additional Information:

Additional information is available at [www.ndhealth.gov/disease](http://www.ndhealth.gov/disease) or by calling the North Dakota Department of Health at 800-472-2180.

## Resources:

American Academy of Pediatrics. [Varicella-Zoster Virus Infections.] In: Kimberlin DW, Brady MT, Jackson MA, Long SS, eds. *Red Book: 2018 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. 31<sup>st</sup> ed. Itasca, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2018: 869-883.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). Shingles. Retrieved from [www.cdc.gov/shingles/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/shingles/index.html).