

Shingles Fact Sheet

What is Shingles and how did I get it?

- 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 cannot be passed from one person to another. However, the virus that causes shingles, the varicella zoster virus, **can be spread from a person with active shingles to a person who has never had chickenpox. In such cases, the person exposed to the virus might develop chickenpox, but they would not develop shingles.** The virus is spread through direct contact with fluid from the rash blisters, not through sneezing, coughing or casual contact. You can only spread shingles when the rash is in the blister-phase. A person is not infectious before blisters appear and once the rash has developed crusts the person is no longer contagious.

What do I do if I have Shingles?

- Keep the rash covered.
- Do not touch or scratch the rash.
- Wash your hands often to prevent the spread of varicella zoster virus.
- Until your rash has developed crusts, avoid contact with pregnant women who have never had chickenpox or the varicella vaccine, premature or low birth weight infants and anyone who is immune compromised (someone undergoing chemotherapy, organ transplant recipients and people with HIV infection).

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.
- Calamine lotion, colloidal oatmeal baths and wet compresses can help with itching as well as oral Diphenhydramine (Benadryl) USE CAUTION WHEN TAKING BENADRYL, IT IS THE ACTIVE INGREDIENT IN MANY OTC SLEEP AIDS AND WILL CAUSE DROWSINESS.

Prevention

The shingles vaccine (Zostavax®) was recommended by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) in 2006 to reduce the risk of shingles and its associated pain in people age 60 years and older.

Your risk for developing shingles increases as you age. The Shingles Prevention Study involved individuals age 60 years and older and found the shingles vaccine significantly reduced disease in this age group. The vaccine is currently recommended for persons 60 years of age and older. Even people who have had shingles can receive the vaccine to help prevent future occurrences of the disease.

Shingles vaccine is available in pharmacies and doctor's offices. Talk with your healthcare professional if you have questions about shingles vaccine.

At this time, CDC does not have a recommendation for routine use of shingles vaccine in persons 50 through 59 years old. However, the vaccine is approved by FDA for people in this age group.