

What You Need to Know About Shingles

What is shingles? Shingles (also called herpes zoster, or just zoster) is a painful skin rash, often with blisters. Shingles is caused by the varicella zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox. After you have chickenpox, the virus stays in your body and can cause shingles later in life. You can't catch shingles from another person. However, a person who has never had chickenpox (or chickenpox vaccine) could get chickenpox from someone with shingles. A shingles rash usually appears on one side of the face or body and heals within 2 to 4 weeks. Its main symptom is pain, which can be severe. Other symptoms can include fever, headache, chills, and upset stomach. Very rarely, a shingles infection can lead to pneumonia, hearing problems, blindness, brain inflammation (encephalitis), or death.

For about 1 person in 5, severe pain can continue even long after the rash has cleared up. This long-lasting pain is called post-herpetic neuralgia (PHN). Shingles is far more common in people 50 years of age and older than in younger people, and the risk increases with age. It is also more common in people whose immune system is weakened because of a disease such as cancer, or by drugs such as steroids or chemotherapy. At least 1 million people a year in the United States get shingles.

There is a vaccine which may prevent shingles. Recombinant shingles vaccine was approved by FDA in 2017 for the prevention of shingles. In clinical trials, it was more than 90% effective in preventing shingles. It can also reduce the likelihood of PHN. Two doses, 2 to 6 months apart, are recommended for adults 50 and older. This vaccine is also recommended for people who have already gotten the live shingles vaccine (Zostavax). There is no live virus in this vaccine.

Some people should not get the vaccine. Conditions include having any severe, life-threatening allergies, pregnancy or breastfeeding and if you are not feeling well. If you have a mild illness, such as a cold, you can probably get the vaccine. If you are moderately or severely ill, you should probably wait until you recover. Your doctor can advise you.

~U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Wishing you joy and good health,
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