

Shingles (herpes zoster)

What is shingles?

Shingles, also known as herpes zoster, is an infection caused by the varicella zoster virus, the same virus which causes chickenpox. Anyone who has previously had chickenpox can get shingles. It is more common in older adults but can occur in children and people with weakened immune systems.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

- A rash associated with painful blisters, which crust over in 7 to 10 days. The rash most commonly affects an area of skin on one side of the chest, back or face.
- The rash may be preceded by itching, burning, tingling of the skin, pain or generally feeling unwell.

What are the complications of shingles?

- **Eye:** if the rash involves the forehead and skin around the eye, the eye itself can be affected. This can occur up to several weeks after the onset of the rash. Eye problems include:
 - Conjunctivitis
 - Inflammation inside the eye causing decreased vision. Episodes of inflammation can be recurrent even after the initial episode of shingles has settled.
- **Ear:** if the rash is around the ear, ear pain, blisters on inside of ear and hearing loss can occur.
- **Face:** weakness of facial muscles on the side of the facial rash.
- **Skin:** scarring, bacterial infection of blisters.
- **Pain:** persistent pain after rash has gone.

What is the treatment of shingles?

- Antiviral medications will speed the healing of the blisters and decrease the duration and severity of pain. They are most effective if given within three days of the onset of the rash.
- Pain medications can be prescribed and managed by your GP.
- If the skin around your eye is affected, you should have your eyes examined. Your eye specialist may need to prescribe you with anti-inflammatory eye drops. Eye complications may be treated with a combination of lubricants, steroid eye drops and antibiotic ointment if your eye is affected.



Is shingles contagious?

Shingles itself is not contagious, but some people who have not previously had chickenpox and have not been vaccinated can get chickenpox if they are exposed to the fluid in the shingles blisters.

Once the blisters have dried up, then they are no longer contagious (usually 7 to 10 days). At this time it is usually safe to return to work or school. If the blisters are in an area that can be covered with clothing, it may be possible to return to work or school sooner.

Chickenpox however, is highly contagious. Non-immune patients who are at risk of severe disease include infants, pregnant women and patients who have weakened immune systems. Patients with shingles may be asked to wait to see the doctor in an area away from other people.

Things to remember:

- Take care to avoid the potential spread of the virus and exposure to at risk (non-immune) individuals. Cover blisters where possible if shingles is suspected prior to seeing the doctor.
- Seek medical attention if you have persistent pain, red eye, blurred vision or decreased hearing.
- Please discuss when it is safe to return to work with your health care provider.

For any further information please contact our Infection Control Department.

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