

## Dealing with Shingles

### Q: What causes shingles, and can it be prevented?

**A:** Each year, approximately 1 million Americans will develop a painful viral infection known as shingles. Shingles is an infection caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox, but not everyone who had chickenpox will develop shingles.

The risk for shingles increases with age. Half of all cases of shingles are in people over sixty. Anyone with a weakened immune system from illness--such as cancer, leukemia, lymphoma, and the virus that causes AIDS---are at higher risk.

Once you have chicken pox, the virus can stay quiet in your nerve tissues for years. But for many people, the virus "awakens" and forms blisters on the skin. You may get a few blisters or an extensive rash that can occur on your chest and back, waistline, upper arms or side of the face.

The shingles rash will begin with tingling and/or pain, or sometimes numbness or itching in one area. Within a few days a rash will develop and may spread. Fluid-filled blisters that are very similar to chickenpox blisters will grow out of the rash.

The pain from shingles can be mild to intense. Some people will have mostly itching; others will feel pain, even from a gentle touch or breeze. Other symptoms of shingles can include fever, headache, chills, and upset stomach.

Shingles can last from two weeks to several weeks. Most people will only have one outbreak in a lifetime, but a second and third outbreak is possible.

Shingles is not contagious: only people who have had chickenpox can get it. No one can spread shingles. The only way you can get shingles is by having chickenpox. The virus that causes shingles can be passed from one person to another during the blister stage – if the blisters are touched. But that person would come down with chickenpox---not shingles. The virus is not spread through sneezing, coughing or casual contact.

Once the blisters have developed a scab, the virus can no longer be spread. Some people experience "after-shingles" pain, an often debilitating condition resulting from the nerve damage caused by the shingles virus.

Shingles can be prevented by getting a vaccination. More than 99% of Americans ages 40 and older have had chickenpox, even if they don't remember getting the disease. So it is recommended that people over 60 years get a one-time shingles vaccine shot. Even if you have had shingles, you can still receive the shingles vaccine to help prevent future occurrences

There is very little risk of the vaccine causing serious harm, but people with a weak immune system may wish to wait to get the vaccine. You should check with your doctor to see if the vaccine is right for you. The vaccine cuts your risk of getting shingles in half, and if you do get shingles, the outbreak will be milder and cause less pain.

Any Medicare Part D (drug plan) will cover a shingles shot, but your drug plan may require a small copayment.

