Shingles- Factsheet

What is shingles?

Shingles, also known as herpes zoster, is an infectious disease caused by the varicella zoster virus (VZV). This is the same virus that causes chickenpox. After a person recovers from chickenpox, the virus stays inactive in their body. The virus can be reactivated in their body later in life, causing shingles.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

Shingles causes a painful, blistering rash that usually develops in a single stripe around either the left or right side of the face or body. Before the rash develops, people often have pain, itching, or tingling in the area where the rash will be. Other symptoms can include fever, headache, chills, and upset stomach.

How is shingles spread?

Shingles cannot be passed from one person to another. However, a person with shingles can pass the virus that causes chickenpox to someone else who has never had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine before. This can happen if a person who is not immune to chickenpox comes in direct contact with the fluid from the blisters of the shingles rash. People with shingles cannot spread the virus before their blisters appear, or after their rash has completely dried and crusted.

How long are people contagious?

If a person has not had chickenpox or been vaccinated against chickenpox, they can get the virus from direct contact with someone who has shingles blisters. The virus doesn't spread after the blisters have formed dry, crusted scabs. Shingles blisters usually scab over in 7-10 days and disappear completely in 2-4 weeks.

Who gets shingles?

Anyone who has recovered from chickenpox can develop shingles. Even children can get shingles, especially if they had chickenpox at a very young age; however, the risk of shingles increases as you get older. People with weakened immune systems have a higher risk of getting shingles. Most people get only one episode of shingles in their lives; however, it is possible to have a second or even third episode.

What treatment is available for people with shingles?

Several antiviral medicines are available to treat shingles and shorten the length and severity of illness. People with shingles should start taking those medicines as soon as possible. There are also over-the-counter pain medicines, lotions, and other products to help relieve discomfort from the rash.

Do people with shingles need to be kept home from school, work or childcare?

Shingles is less contagious than chickenpox, and the risk of a person with shingles spreading the virus is usually lower. If you can keep the rash completely covered, you can attend work or school. If you have shingles, you should wash your hands often to prevent the spread of the virus. Avoid direct contact with pregnant women who have never had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine, premature or

low birth weight infants, and people with weakened immune systems until the rash has crusted over completely.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting shingles?

If you have ever had chickenpox, the best way to prevent shingles is to get the shingles vaccine. Adults 50 years and older, and people aged 19 years or older who have or will soon have a weakened immune system, should get 2 doses of the shingles vaccine (called Shingrix®). This vaccine, which comes in two doses given 2-6 months apart, is highly effective at preventing shingles and the painful complications that can come with it. If you previously received an older type of shingles vaccine called Zostavax®, which was discontinued in 2020, you should get re-vaccinated with Shingrix®.