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Shingles and the Vaccination

Risk of Getting Shingles

About 1 out of every 3 people in the United States will develop shingles, also known as herpes zoster, in their lifetime. An estimated 1 million people get shingles each year in this country. If you've ever had chickenpox, you can get shingles. Even children can get shingles. Your risk of shingles increases as you get older.

Some people have a greater risk of getting shingles. This includes people who

- have medical conditions that keep their immune systems from working properly, such as certain cancers like leukemia and lymphoma, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and
- receive immunosuppressive drugs, such as steroids and drugs that are given after organ transplantation.

People who develop shingles typically have only one episode in their lifetime. However, a person can have a second or even a third episode.

Transmission

Anyone who has had chickenpox in the past can develop shingles; even children can get shingles. Shingles cannot be passed from one person to another.

The virus that causes shingles, varicella zoster virus (VZV) can spread from a person with active shingles and cause chickenpox in someone who had never had chickenpox or received chickenpox vaccine.

VZV spreads through direct contact with fluid from the rash blisters.

Most people who develop shingles have only one episode during their lifetime. However, you can get the disease more than once.

A person with active shingles can spread the virus when the rash is in the blister-phase. You are not infectious before the blisters appear. Once the rash crusts, you are no longer infectious. VZV from a person with shingles is less contagious than the virus from someone with chickenpox. The risk of spreading the virus is low if you cover the shingles rash.

Signs & Symptoms

Shingles is a painful rash that develops on one side of the face or body. The rash forms blisters that typically scab over in 7 to 10 days and clears up within 2 to 4 weeks.

Before the rash develops, people often have pain, itching, or tingling in the area where the rash will develop. This may happen anywhere from 1 to 5 days before the rash appears.

Most commonly, the rash occurs in a single stripe around either the left or the right side of the body. In other cases, the rash occurs on one side of the face. Shingles on the face can affect the eye and cause vision loss. In rare cases (usually among people with weakened immune systems), the rash may be more widespread and look similar to a chickenpox rash.

Other symptoms of shingles can include

- Fever
- Headache
- Chills
- Upset stomach

Prevention

The only way to reduce the risk of developing shingles and the long-term pain from post-herpetic neuralgia (PHN) is to get vaccinated. CDC recommends that people aged 60 years and older get one dose of shingles vaccine. Shingles vaccine is available in pharmacies and doctor's offices. Talk with your healthcare professional if you have questions about shingles vaccine.

Treatment

Several antiviral medicines—acyclovir, valacyclovir, and famciclovir—are available to treat shingles and shorten the length and severity of the illness. These medicines are most effective if you start taking them as soon as possible after the rash appears. **If you think you have shingles, contact your healthcare provider as soon as possible to discuss treatment.**

Pain medicine, either over-the-counter or a prescription from your doctor, may help relieve the pain caused by shingles. Wet compresses, calamine lotion, and colloidal oatmeal baths (a lukewarm bath mixed with ground-up oatmeal) may help relieve itching.

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Centers for Disease Control (CDC)

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