

Shingles

What is shingles and who can get it?

Shingles is a painful rash caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. After a chickenpox infection, the virus does not leave the body, but hides in nerve cells and can reactivate again later as shingles.

About 10-15 per cent of people who have had chickenpox will develop shingles at some point in their lifetime. The disease is mostly seen in adults over age 50, but can occur in children. The risk of shingles increases with age. People with weakened immune systems, such as the elderly, and those with certain medical conditions, are more likely to get shingles. Most people who have shingles only get it once in their lifetime. However, people with weakened immune systems may suffer repeated attacks.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

The first symptom is often a tingling or a burning feeling on the skin, itchiness, or a stabbing pain, followed by a rash several days later. The rash develops in a line-like pattern that follows the nerve path and is usually on one side of the body. One to two days later the rash changes to fluid-filled blisters (vesicles) that look like chickenpox. The rash is almost always very itchy and is often very painful. It often lasts 10-15 days without treatment.

How is shingles spread?

A person with shingles can only spread the virus to people who have never had chickenpox. The virus that causes shingles is in the fluid of the vesicles. It can be passed through direct contact with the vesicle fluid or by direct contact with items soiled by the fluids of the vesicles. When the virus gets into the eyes, nose, or throat of someone who has never had chickenpox, that person can get chickenpox. It takes 10-21 days from the time of contact with the virus for chickenpox to appear.

There is no recommended period of exclusion for a person with shingles. If you have fluid filled vesicles that are draining, you should cover them. Once all the vesicles have scabbed, the person is no longer able to spread the virus. Good hand washing is important to minimize spread.

If you have shingles, it is a good idea to avoid close contact with people who are unimmunized or have not had chickenpox infection previously.

Can shingles be treated?

Most cases get better without treatment. However, anti-viral medication can shorten the length of the disease and reduce symptoms. The anti-viral medications work best when given immediately after the symptoms first appear.

Can shingles be prevented?

Yes, but chickenpox infection must be prevented in order to prevent shingles. You cannot get shingles if you have never had chickenpox. There is a vaccine to prevent chickenpox and immunized people are unlikely to develop shingles.

Additionally, Zostavax™ is a vaccine used to prevent shingles. Zostavax™ is approved in Canada for use in adults aged 60 years and older. Adults interested in receiving this vaccine should speak to their health care provider.

What are the risks of shingles?

Shingles is not usually dangerous to healthy people. Anyone with shingles on the upper half of their face should seek medical care immediately because of the danger that the virus could spread to the eye. Also, the open vesicles could become infected with bacteria, which could lead to serious illness. Covering the rash and washing hands carefully will reduce the risk of infection.

When should I see a doctor?

See a doctor if you suspect shingles. If you have already been told you have shingles and you have a high fever, feel very ill, or if the vesicles are spreading, speak with your doctor.

Who should I talk to if I have more questions?

If you have more questions call your health care provider or the Halton Region Health Department.