

# Shingles

## Patient education

### What are shingles?

Shingles, also known as herpes zoster, is an infection caused by the varicella zoster virus (VZV).

### What causes shingles?

Shingles affects people that have already had chickenpox, or in rarer cases, people that have had the chickenpox vaccine.

After someone has a chickenpox infection, the virus that causes chickenpox, VZV, remains inactive in their body after recovery. VZV can then reactivate in their body years later, usually due to a weakened immune system, and cause shingles.

### What increases the risks?

Although anyone that has had chickenpox can get shingles, those at an increased risk include:

- Older adults (50 years or older)
  - The occurrence and severity of shingles increases with age
- People with a weakened immune system due to health conditions, such as HIV/AIDS or cancer, and/or medications
- People experiencing emotional stress

The best way to prevent shingles and/or reduce the severity is by getting the shingles vaccine. The shingles vaccine is recommended for most people that are 60 years of age and older.

People with shingles may also spread the virus through blister fluid. To prevent further exposures:

- Cover blisters with appropriate dressing until they crust over
- Stay at home if you have a weakened immune system as you may be able to spread the virus through your respiratory tract
- Disinfect any surfaces exposed to discharge from the blisters

### How do I know that I have shingles?

Symptoms of shingles include:

- Pain, itching, or tingling.
- Painful rash with small, fluid-filled blisters.
  - The rash can be anywhere on the body, but is usually limited to one strip on the left or right side of the body

- Blisters dry, scab over, and heal within a few weeks, but may leave scars
- Fever and/or headache, in some cases.

Some risks associated with shingles include:

- Severe pain around the rash lasting a month or longer and/or interfering with daily activities
- Secondary infections caused by harmful bacteria entering sores

Health care providers can diagnose shingles by examining your rash, and if necessary, taking fluid samples from blisters.

## How is this treated?

Shingles is often treated with antiviral medication that helps:

- Reduce the severity and duration of symptoms.
- Decrease the duration of your shingles episode.
- Minimize complications.

Your health care provider may also prescribe additional medication for swelling and pain.

## If you have been diagnosed with shingles, please contact your doctor or health care provider immediately if you are experiencing any of the following:

- Pain that is not relieved with prescribed medications
- Pain that does not get better after your rash heals
- Other signs of infections, such as:
  - Redness or swelling around the rash
  - Fluid or blood coming from the rash
  - Pus or a foul smell coming from the rash

## If you have been diagnosed with shingles, please get help immediately if you are experiencing any of the following:

- Rash on your nose or face
- Facial pain and/or pain around your eyes
- No feeling on one side of your face
- Ear pain or ringing on your ear
- Loss of taste
- Difficulty seeing
- Worsening symptoms

## Where can I get more information?

About Shingles: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/infectious-diseases/fact-sheet-shingles-herpes-zoster.html>

## References:

Public Health Agency of Canada. (2013, August 2). *Fact Sheet – Shingles (Herpes zoster)*. Canada.ca. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/infectious-diseases/fact-sheet-shingles-herpes-zoster.html>

*Shingles*. (2011, August). York Region. Retrieved July 18, 2023, from <https://www.york.ca/media/51776/download>