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## What is shingles?



Shingles is another name for a condition called "herpes zoster." It causes a painful rash. You can only get shingles if you had chickenpox in the past or if you have had the chickenpox vaccine ("shot").

Shingles is an acute viral inflammation of the sensory ganglia of spinal and cranial nerves associated with a vesicular eruption and neuralgic pain and caused by reactivation of the herpes virus that causes chickenpox. Shingles is also called herpes zoster, because the varicella virus is in the larger herpes family of viruses. The word shingles comes from the Latin word for belt or girdle. It is most common in people over 60 years of age, but it can occur in young people as well.

### How does Shingles occur?

After you recover from chickenpox, the chickenpox virus is not destroyed but goes back to the roots of your nerve cells (near the spinal cord) and becomes dormant, or inactive. Later, when the chickenpox virus is reactivated, the symptoms are called shingles.

*A person with shingles can transmit chickenpox to a person who has never had the virus.*

What causes the reactivation of the virus is not known.

A weakened immune system seems to allow reactivation of the virus. This may occur with immune-suppressing medications, with another illness, or after major surgery. It is also seen as a complication of cancer or AIDS. Advancing age, chronic use of cortisone-type drugs, and the stress of major surgery may trigger shingles. The virus may also become active again after trauma to the skin from injury or sunburn. Emotional stress seems to be a common trigger as well.

### What are the symptoms?

The first sign of shingles is often burning, sharp pain, tingling, or numbness in or under your skin on one side of your body or face. The most common site is the back or upper abdomen. You may have severe itching or aching rather than pain. You may also feel tired and ill with fever, chills, headache, and upset stomach.

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After several days, you will notice a rash of small, clear, fluid-filled blisters on reddened skin.



Within 3 days after they appear, the blisters will turn yellow, then dry and crust over. Over the next 2 weeks the crusts will drop off, sometimes leaving small, pitted scars.

Because they tend to follow nerve paths, the blisters are usually found in a line, often extending from the back or flank around to the abdomen, just on one side. Shingles usually don't cross the midline of the body. The rash may appear on one side of your face. Some people have painful eye inflammations and infections.

### Is Shingles contagious?

A person with shingles can transmit chickenpox to a person who has never had the virus. There are virus particles in the blister fluid.

Shingles is much less contagious than chickenpox because chickenpox can be spread through the air, whereas spread of shingles occurs only with direct contact (for example, a washcloth) with the blister fluid.

If you have shingles, avoid contact with infants, children, pregnant women, and adults who have never had chickenpox, until your blisters are completely dry.

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## How is shingles diagnosed?

Your doctor will diagnose shingles based on the history of your symptoms and the appearance of the blisters on one side of your body. Your doctor may order lab tests to look for the virus in fluid from a blister.

## TREATMENT

The shingles virus has to run its natural course, but you can get some relief by:

- Applying cool compresses
- Taking acetaminophen or other mild pain relievers

Your doctor may also prescribe:

- Stronger painkillers for more serious discomfort.
- Antibacterial salves or lotions to control skin infection.
- Capsaicin cream for pain.
- Acyclovir, an antiviral drug, to speed recovery and lessen change of prolonged symptoms from nerve inflammation.
- Corticosteroids, for people over 50 years of age.

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## HOW TO PREVENT SHINGLES

A vaccine to prevent chickenpox is now available. You can also protect your immune system and lessen your chances of getting shingles by keeping your stress under control.

## WHEN SHOULD I CALL MY DOCTOR?

You should see your doctor for the **initial diagnosis** and for age-appropriate treatment.

After your initial visit you should contact your doctor if:

- You develop worsening pain or fever.
- Signs of bacterial infection of the blisters (for example increasing pain, redness and/or milky-yellow drainage from the blister sites).
- Blisters close to the eyes.

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## SHINGLES (Herpes Zoster)



Shingles

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Shingles is an infection caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. This virus is called *varicella zoster*. Varicella refers to chickenpox and zoster to shingles. You cannot develop shingles unless you have had a previous infection of chickenpox (usually as a child) or the chickenpox vaccine.

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