

# Shingles

## What Are Shingles?

Shingles are a painful rash caused by the varicella zoster virus. This is the same virus that causes chickenpox. After a chickenpox infection clears up, the virus doesn't leave your body. Instead the virus stays inside of you and for unknown reasons become active again many years later. The risk increases with age. The shingles rash is usually on one side of the body and can last two to four weeks.

## What Are the Signs and Symptoms of Shingles?

Shingles usually start as an area of itching or tingling a few days before the rash appears. Other symptoms that may also appear before the shingles rash include: fever; headache; chills; and an upset stomach. The rash will start as redness on the skin. Bumps will appear and turn into blisters with a clear fluid. This rash can cause itchiness, swelling and severe pain. Most commonly, shingles appear on only one area of the body (known as localized shingles). In rare cases, it can appear all over a person's body (known as disseminated shingles).

## How Do You Get Shingles?

A person who does not have immunity to the varicella zoster virus (virus that also causes chickenpox) is at risk of becoming infected with the virus. If someone who is not immune comes into contact with the blister fluid, they can develop the chicken pox. That person can then develop shingles later on in life. The rash is not contagious before the blisters appear or after the rash crusts/scabs. Shingles has a low risk of spreading if the rash is covered once blisters start to develop. If blisters are open, this can increase your risk of other infections too.

## What Special Precautions Are Required for Shingles? What Do I Need to Know?

Together we can take steps to stop the spread of the virus to other patients in the hospital:

- Keep blisters covered to prevent spreading the virus;
- Everyone who enters or leaves your room will clean their hands;
- Your room and the equipment used in your room will be cleaned and disinfected regularly;
- You will stay in a room by yourself if your blisters are heavily leaking or you have shingles all over your body;
- If your blisters are heavily leaking, a sign for "Contact Precautions" will be placed on your door to remind everyone of the special steps. Everyone who cares for you will wear gloves and a long-sleeved gown;

- If you have shingles all over your body, a sign for “Airborne Precautions” will be placed on your door to remind everyone who enters your room about the special steps. Everyone who cares for you will wear gloves and a long-sleeved gown and a mask; and
- Your activities outside your room may be restricted until your special precautions are removed.

## What About My Family and Visitors?

Family and friends can still visit you in the hospital but need to take the special precautions above too. Before entering and leaving your room, your family and visitors must clean their hands with alcohol hand rub. We ask that your family and visitors not assist other patients. Instead, they can assist by using the call bell to ask for help.

## What Is Good Hand Cleaning?

Our staff welcomes reminders to clean our hands. We invite you to ask anyone who enters your room to clean their hands before and after they touch you. Ask any staff member to show you good hand cleaning (20 seconds of soap and running water OR waterless alcohol hand rub for 20 seconds until hands are dry). Please clean your hands often and ask for help to clean your hands if needed:

- After using the bathroom;
- After blowing your nose;
- Before eating and drinking;
- Before and after you touch your dressing or wounds;
- When your hands are visibly dirty; and
- Before you leave your room.

## What Are the Long-term Effects of Shingles?

Post-Herpetic Neuralgia (PHN) can occur after someone has shingles. PHN is caused by damage to the nerves after a shingles infection and causes severe pain in the area where the shingles rash was long after it has healed. The pain makes the person very sensitive to touch and temperature changes. PHN can last from a few weeks to a few years. Those with preexisting medical conditions and the elderly are at highest risk for PHN.

## What Is the Treatment for Shingles?

Antiviral medicines can be used to treat shingles. For healthy people who get treatment soon after their symptoms start, the rash typically lasts for two to four weeks with no scarring from the blisters. Someone who has other medical conditions may have symptoms that last longer. There is a shingles vaccine available. A person who has had shingles in the past can still receive the vaccine.

### References:

Center for Disease Control: Shingles (Herpes Zoster)