

Shingles

Fact Sheet

What is shingles?

Shingles is a viral infection that produces a painful, blistering rash that is sensitive to touch.

What are the symptoms?

Severe pain and numbness around the skin lesions are common and can occur before or after the skin lesions appear. The rash lasts about seven to 10 days and heals in two to four weeks. Complications can develop in about 30 per cent of the cases. In addition to the rash-associated pain, the nerve pain that comes from shingles can last for months or even years after the rash heals (post-herpetic neuralgia).

What causes it?

Shingles is caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. After the chickenpox blisters heal, the virus that caused them stays in the nerve cells. The virus may be there for many years and not cause a problem. Sometimes, for unknown reasons, it becomes active again and causes shingles.

Who is at risk?

Shingles occurs in about 10 to 20 per cent of the population. Anyone who has had chickenpox is at risk for developing shingles. The elderly and those with a weakened immune system are at an increased risk.

When is it contagious and how is it spread?

It is usually contagious one to two days before the onset of the rash until all the lesions are crusted over (usually five days). It is spread by fluid from the lesions - by direct contact or on soiled articles. Shingles is less contagious than chickenpox as there is no airborne spread. Exposure to shingles virus does not result in shingles infection but may result in chickenpox in the individuals who have not had chickenpox. An infected person should avoid contact with individuals who have not had the chickenpox vaccine or previous infection, and those with weakened immune system.

How can it be prevented?

The risk of getting shingles increases as you get older.

Vaccination is one way to prevent and minimize the severity and the duration of illness, and is recommended for those aged 50 and older; and those 18 years of age or older with a weakened immune system. Shingrix® is currently the only vaccine authorized for use in Canada. Zostavax® was first authorized in 2008 and was discontinued in 2023. Good personal hygiene and hand washing are important. Articles soiled by discharges from lesions should be handled with care.

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Other Questions?

- For more information on the illness, talk to your health-care provider or call our Infectious and Communicable Diseases Program at 613-966-5500, ext. 349.
- For more information on shingles vaccine eligibility, talk to your health-care provider or call our Immunization Program at 613-966-5500, ext. 221. Toll Free 1-800-267-2803 | TTY Dial 711 (1-800-267-6511) | hpePublicHealth.ca

References

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