

Shingles

What is shingles and who can get it?

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.

After you have chickenpox (usually as a child), the virus that causes it stays in your body, in certain nerve cells. Most of the time your immune system keeps the chickenpox virus in these cells. As you get older or if your immune system gets weak, the chickenpox virus may escape from the nerve cells and cause shingles.

Most people who get shingles are more than 50 years old.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

Shingles causes a painful, blistering rash. Sometimes the pain starts a few days before the rash appears.

The rash begins with raised reddish bumps. In a few days, these bumps turn into blisters. You might feel a stinging or burning pain. The rash may wrap around your back and chest, or it may be on one side of your face.

The blisters crust over and fall off after 7 to 10 days. You may see changes in the colour of your skin when the scabs fall off. In bad cases, the colour changes last forever.

Even though the rash gets better or goes away in a few weeks, the pain may last longer. In most people, the pain goes away in 1 to 3 months.

Shingles can also affect your eyes, causing swollen eyelids, redness and pain.

How is shingles treated?

Shingles is often treated with acyclovir (brand name: Zovirax), or a similar tablet. These medicines work much better if you start taking them in the first three days after you get the rash.

What can I do about the pain?

To help with the pain of shingles, you could buy a painkiller like paracetamol or an anti-inflammatory like Ibuprofen

If shingles causes severe pain, your doctor might have you take a prescription pain medicine.

What is postherpetic neuralgia?

"Postherpetic neuralgia" is the name used when the pain of shingles lasts for a long time after the rash is gone. About 1 in 5 people with shingles gets postherpetic neuralgia.

Like shingles, postherpetic neuralgia causes a stinging or burning pain. Your skin might become very sensitive to a light touch, such as from a bed sheet or moving air.

Most people with postherpetic neuralgia get better with time. Almost all of them are free of pain within 1 year. A few people have chronic pain (pain that doesn't go away).

How is postherpetic neuralgia treated?

Postherpetic neuralgia is often treated with over-the-counter pain medicines. If these medicines don't help enough, your doctor might try some other treatments.

Some medicines that can also be used to treat depression or seizures can help the nerve pain of postherpetic neuralgia

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