

HERPES ZOSTER (SHINGLES)

Shingles (herpes zoster) is a nerve infection caused by the chicken-pox virus. Shingles results from activation of chicken-pox virus that has remained in your body since you had chicken-pox. You do not catch shingles from another person. It comes from within your own body when the virus is reactivated. The virus activation is limited to a single nerve root. This accounts for the pattern of the rash, which is always on one side of the body. The nerve involvement explains the stinging, burning, or pain common in shingles. Some patients have discomfort before the rash appears. For example, patients have been admitted to the hospital for a heart attack and the next day shingles appear on their chest.

The rash of shingles begins as red patches that soon develop blisters. The blisters may remain small or can become large. They heal in two to four weeks. They may leave some scars.

Many patients mistakenly believe that “nervousness” causes shingles. This is wrong; shingles is a viral infection of a nerve and has nothing to do with being “nervous” or stressed.

Shingles is not contagious. Theoretically, a person with shingles could transmit chicken-pox to a child or an adult who has never had chicken-pox. This is highly unlikely unless the shingles is on an exposed area such as the face and there is very close contact with the child. Therefore, you do not have to quarantine yourself. If the shingles is in a covered area there is no problem at all. If the shingles is on an exposed area it would be best to keep away from any children who have not had chicken-pox until it has crusted over completely.

Treatment for shingles depends on how long you have had it. In the early stages antibiotic pills are prescribed, which kill the virus. In later stages antibiotic salves are used to be applied directly to the blisters.

If you have a lot of pain you will be given a prescription painkiller to take until the pain subsides. The pain is caused by inflammation and swelling around the nerve. The blistering rash usually clears up in a few weeks. The discomfort may last longer.

Do not open your blisters. You should soak the blisters or crusts for ten minutes twice daily with a washcloth soaked in lukewarm water. After soaking, pat dry the area and apply a thin layer of Polysporin Ointment. This ointment is available over-the-counter. Later, when the crusts and scabs are separating, your skin may become dry and cracked. If that happens rub on a small amount of antibiotic ointment (Polysporin or bacitracin) three or four times a day.