

# Shingles (Herpes Zoster)

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## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### What is shingles?

Shingles, also called herpes zoster or zoster, is a painful skin rash caused by the varicella zoster virus (VZV). VZV is the same virus that causes chickenpox. After a person recovers from chickenpox, the virus stays in the body. Usually the virus does not cause any problems; however, the virus can reappear years later, causing shingles. The same virus that causes genital herpes, a sexually transmitted disease, does not cause herpes zoster.

### What are the symptoms and complications of shingles?

Shingles causes a painful rash that can develop anywhere on the body, but it usually appears on one side of the face or torso. Before the rash shows up, people typically have pain, itching or tingling in the area where it will develop. This can be several days before the rash appears.

Other symptoms of shingles include:

- Fever and chills
- Headache
- Upset stomach

About 10 to 18 percent of people who get shingles will develop long-term nerve pain called postherpetic neuralgia (PHN). PHN occurs in the areas where the rash developed and can last for months or years after shingles clears up. Older adults with shingles are more likely to develop PHN.

When shingles develops on the face, it can cause serious complications with the eye, including blindness.

**Although rare, shingles can also lead to other complications:**

- Pneumonia (lung inflammation)
- Hearing problems
- Encephalitis (brain inflammation)
- Death

### Are there any long-term effects from shingles?

Very rarely, shingles can lead to pneumonia, hearing problems, blindness, brain inflammation (encephalitis) or death. For about one person in five, severe pain can continue even after the rash clears up. This pain is called post-herpetic neuralgia. As people get older, they are more likely to develop post-herpetic neuralgia and it is more likely to be severe.

### Is there a vaccine to prevent shingles?

Yes. The shingles vaccine, Shingrix, may help prevent shingles. Shingrix, was approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2017 for use in the United States.

- Older Adults: The CDC recommends two doses of the vaccine in adults 50 years of age and older to prevent shingles and any related complications.
- Young Adults: The vaccine is also recommended for adults 19 years of age and older who have weakened immune systems because of disease or therapy.

The two vaccine doses should be given two to six months apart. It is recommended to get the Shingrix vaccine even if you have had shingles already.

### Is the shingles vaccine safe?

The shingles vaccine is safe and effective. The vaccine helps your immune system protect your body against shingles.

Studies showed the vaccine was 97 percent effective at preventing shingles in adults 50 to 69 years of age. The vaccine also helps reduce long-term and serious complications from shingles, including PHN.

Most people who get the shingles vaccine do not experience any side effects. For those who do, side effects are usually mild and go away on their own. Side effects can include pain or soreness at the spot of the injection or headaches.

### How often can a person get shingles?

### Is there a treatment for shingles?

Several medicines, acyclovir (Zovirax), valacyclovir (Valtrex) and famciclovir (Famvir) are available to treat shingles.

- These medications should be started as soon as possible after the rash appears, and will help shorten how long the illness lasts and its severity.
- Pain medicine may also help with pain caused by shingles.
- Call your doctor as soon as possible to discuss treatment options.

### Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic, a community pharmacist or your local public health unit.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [cdc.gov/shingles/about/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/shingles/about/index.html)

*This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. If you have questions about the disease described above or think that you may have this infection, consult a health care provider.*

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