



## Shingles

### What is shingles?

Shingles 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, it can come back years later, causing shingles.

### What are the symptoms?

Shingles usually starts as a rash on one side of the face or body. The rash starts as blisters that scab after three to five days. The rash usually goes away within two to four weeks. Before the rash begins, there is often pain, itching or tingling in the area where the rash will develop. Other symptoms of shingles can include fever, headache, chills and upset stomach.

### Who gets shingles?

Anyone who has recovered from chickenpox may develop shingles, including children. However, shingles is seen most commonly in people 50 years old and older. The risk of getting shingles increases as a person gets older. People who have medical conditions that keep the immune system from working properly, like cancer, leukemia and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) or people who take medications to suppress the immune system, such as steroids and drugs given after organ transplantation, are at greater risk for developing shingles. In the United States, there are an estimated one million cases of shingles each year.

### How is it treated?

Several medicines are available to treat shingles. These medications should be started as soon as possible after the rash appears. They will help shorten how long the illness lasts and how severe the illness is. Pain medicine may also be prescribed to help with pain caused by shingles. Talk to your health care provider for more information. Prednisone (steroids) may also be given to older people with shingles.

### Can shingles be spread to others?

The virus that causes shingles can be spread from a person with active shingles to a person who has never had chickenpox through direct contact with the rash. The person exposed would develop chickenpox, not shingles. This could happen when the shingles rash is in the blister-phase. Once the rash has developed crusts, the person is no longer contagious. A person is not infectious before blisters appear or after the rash is gone. The virus is not spread through sneezing, coughing or casual contact.

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

About one in every five persons has severe pain 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. Very rarely, shingles can lead to pneumonia, hearing problems, blindness, brain inflammation (encephalitis) or death.

### What can be done to prevent the spread of shingles?

The risk of spreading shingles is low if the rash is covered. People with shingles should keep the rash covered, not touch or scratch the rash and wash their hands often to prevent the spread of VZV. Once the rash has developed crusts, the person is no longer contagious.

**What can be done to prevent shingles itself?**

There is now an approved shingles vaccine (Zostavax) used to boost immunity to VZV in people ages 50 and older.

For more information call the Guilford County Department of Public Health at 336-641-7777 or visit [www.myguilford.com](http://www.myguilford.com)

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)