

# shingles

Shingles (herpes zoster) is a painful blistering rash which appears on the skin and is caused by the same virus which causes chickenpox (varicella-zoster virus).

Shingles occurs mainly in older adults, but can occur in all ages, particularly those who have immune system disorders.

Once a person is infected with the chickenpox virus, he/she retains the virus for life in certain nerve cells. The infection can reappear in later years as shingles. A healthy adult or child who has had chickenpox cannot “carry” the virus and infect someone else.

## TRANSMISSION

Shingles can be spread only through direct contact with fluid from the blistering rash. If someone has never had chickenpox, they can get chickenpox if they are exposed to the fluid from the shingles rash. However, people will not develop shingles if they are exposed to chickenpox.

## INFECTIOUS PERIOD

In patients with shingles, the fluid from the blisters may be a source of infection for a week after the appearance of the rash.

## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Vesicles (blisters) may appear on the skin in crops in irregular fashion along nerve pathways. The lesions are usually on one side of the body only. Pain, numbness or tingling are common in the affected area.

## TREATMENT

To relieve itching and avoid scratching and scarring:

- Lukewarm baths containing medicinal oatmeal (Aveeno™) or baking soda (1/2 cup) are soothing and cleanse the skin.
- Calamine lotion may be applied to the blisters.
- Antihistamines as prescribed by your doctor may reduce itching.
- Acetaminophen (Tylenol) can be given for fever. Aspirin™ products SHOULD NOT be given to children, as they may

cause Reyes syndrome, a serious condition that can damage the brain and liver.

There are other specific medications that can be prescribed by your doctor which are effective against shingles if begun within 72 hours of onset of the disease (particularly for people with immune disorders).

## PRECAUTIONS

- Disinfect articles soiled by discharge of fluid from blisters.
- Wash hands well after touching lesions or articles that are soiled.
- Clean your bathtub with bleach solution: 1 part household bleach to 10 parts water.
- Chickenpox or shingles can be extremely serious in people who have poor resistance to infection (eg. People on chemotherapy or receiving steroids).

**If any of the following people are exposed to chickenpox or shingles, they should call their doctor for advice:**

- Adults, especially pregnant women, who have never had chickenpox.
- Premature babies less than four months old.
- People taking certain medicines for asthma or arthritis (steroids, aspirin or immunosuppressants).
- People with immune disorders.
- People with organ transplants.
- People with cancer.

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