



SHINGLES (HERPES ZOSTER)

Information Sheet for Patients and Visitors

What is Shingles?

Shingles is an infection caused by the varicella zoster virus (VZV), which is the same virus that causes chickenpox. When a person recovers from chickenpox, the virus stays in the body in an inactive state and may reactivate years later as herpes zoster (shingles).

Shingles presents as a painful, blistering, skin rash that usually appears on one side of the face or body, scabs after 3 to 5 days and resolves in 2 to 4 weeks. Pain is the most predominant symptom and it can last for months. Other symptoms include a burning or tingling sensation, fever, headache, chills and upset stomach.

How is shingles spread?

Shingles cannot be passed from one person to another, but the virus that causes shingles (VZV) can be spread from a person with shingles to a person who has never had chickenpox **through direct contact with the rash** while the blisters are draining or by indirect contact through freshly soiled clothing with discharge from vesicles.

The person exposed would develop chickenpox, not shingles. Anyone who has recovered from chickenpox may develop shingles, including children but it most commonly occurs in people 50 years old or older.

What special precautions are required for Shingles?

Once crusts form on the rash, the person is no longer contagious and special precautions are no longer required. People who have medical conditions that keep their immune system from working properly, including cancer, leukemia, lymphoma, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infections, or people who receive drugs that weaken the immune system, such as steroids and drugs given after organ transplantation, are at greater risk for shingles.

Prevention:

Ask your healthcare provider or Public Health Unit about the Shingles vaccination if you are 50 years of age or older or if you have a weakened immune system.

What will happen at home?

- Cover your draining rash
- Clean your hands well and often with alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water
- Once the rash has completely crusted over you are no longer contagious to anyone else