

# Shingles

Also Known As: Herpes Zoster

## What is Shingles?

Shingles, also known as zoster or herpes zoster, is a painful skin rash. It is caused by varicella zoster virus (VZV), the same virus that causes chickenpox. Nearly 1 out of every 3 people in the United States will develop shingles in their lifetime.

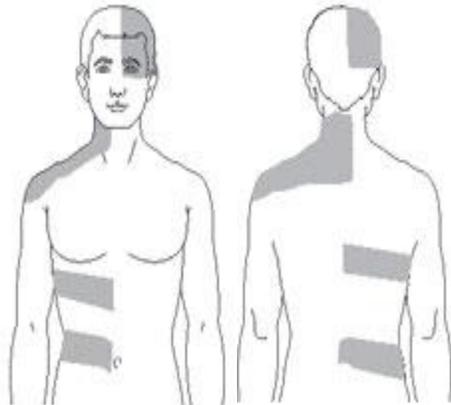
## Cause

Shingles is caused by the varicella-zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox. Anyone who has had chickenpox may develop shingles. After recovering from chickenpox, the virus can enter the nervous system and lie dormant for years. Eventually, it may reactivate and travel along nerve pathways to the skin producing shingles.

The reason for reactivation is unclear. But it may be due to lowered immunity to infections as a person grows older. Shingles is more common in older adults and in people who have weak immune systems.

A person with shingles can pass the varicella-zoster virus to anyone who isn't immune to chickenpox. This usually occurs through direct contact with the open sores of the shingles rash. Once infected, the person will develop chickenpox, however, not shingles.

## Signs and Symptoms



Shingles is a painful rash that develops on one side of the face or body. The rash forms blisters that typically scab over in 7 to 10 days and clears up within 2 to 4 weeks.

Before the rash develops, there may be pain, itching, or tingling in the area where the rash will develop. This may happen anywhere from 1 to 5 days before the rash appears.

Most commonly, the rash occurs in a single stripe around either the left or the right side of the body. In other cases, the rash occurs on one side of the face. In rare cases (usually among people with weakened immune systems), the rash may be more widespread and look similar to a chickenpox rash. Shingles can affect the eye and cause loss of vision.

## Other symptoms of shingles can include

- Fever
- Chills
- Headache
- Upset stomach

## Diagnosis

Shingles is usually diagnosed based on the history of pain on one side of your body, along with the telltale rash and blisters. A doctor may also take a tissue scraping or culture of the blisters for examination in a laboratory.

## Treatment

Several antiviral medicines are available to treat shingles. These medicines will help shorten the length and severity of the illness. But to be effective, they must be started as soon as possible after the rash appears. Thus,

people who have or think they might have shingles should call their healthcare provider as soon as possible to discuss treatment options.

Analgesics (pain medicine) may help relieve the pain caused by shingles. Wet compresses, calamine lotion, and colloidal oatmeal baths may help relieve some of the itching.

## Complications

The most common complication of shingles is a condition called post-herpetic neuralgia (PHN). People with PHN have severe pain in the areas where they had the shingles rash, even after the rash clears up.

The pain from PHN may be severe and debilitating, but it usually resolves in a few weeks or months in most patients. Some people can have pain from PHN for many years.

As people get older, they are more likely to develop PHN, and the pain is more likely to be severe. PHN occurs rarely among people under 40 years of age but can occur in up to a third of untreated people who are 60 years of age and older.

Shingles may lead to serious complications involving the eye. Very rarely, shingles can also lead to pneumonia, hearing problems, blindness, brain inflammation (encephalitis) or death.

## Prevention

The only way to reduce the risk of developing shingles and the long-term pain from post-herpetic neuralgia (PHN) is to get vaccinated. CDC recommends that people aged 50 years and older get two doses of shingles vaccine. Shingles vaccine is available in pharmacies, doctor's offices, and local health departments.

## People at Risk

Anyone who has ever had chickenpox can develop shingles. Most adults in the United States had chickenpox when they were children, before the advent of the routine childhood vaccination that now protects against chickenpox.

Factors that may increase your risk of developing shingles include:

- **Age.** Shingles is most common in people older than 50. The risk increases with age. Some experts estimate that half the people who live to the age of 85 will experience shingles at some point in their lives.
- **Diseases.** Diseases that weaken the immune system, such as HIV/AIDS and cancer, can increase the risk of shingles.
- **Cancer treatments.** Undergoing radiation or chemotherapy can lower the resistance to diseases and may trigger shingles.
- **Medications.** Drugs designed to prevent rejection of transplanted organs can increase the risk of shingles, as can prolonged use of steroids, such as prednisone.



***For more sources of information on this topic visit:***

ST. CLAIR COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT [www.scchealth.co](http://www.scchealth.co)

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES [www.michigan.gov/mdhhs](http://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs)

CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

THE MAYO CLINIC [www.mayoclinic.org](http://www.mayoclinic.org)