

HERPES ZOSTER (SHINGLES)

What causes shingles?

Shingles (Herpes zoster) is a nerve infection caused by the chicken pox virus. Shingles results from activation of chicken-pox virus that has remained in your body since you had chicken –pox perhaps many years ago. The virus activation is limited to a nerve root. That accounts for the pattern of the rash, which usually stops at the body's midline. The nerve involvement explains the stinging, burning, or pain common in shingles. Some patients have discomfort before the rash appears.

The rash of shingles begins as red patches that soon develop blisters. The blisters may remain small or can become large. They heal in two to four weeks and may leave some scars.

Many patients mistakenly believe that “nervousness” causes shingles. This is incorrect. Shingles is a viral infection of a nerve and has nothing to do with being “nervous”.

Is it contagious?

You don't have to quarantine yourself. Until your rash has healed, however, you should keep away from persons who have never had chicken-pox, are ill, or are unable to fight infection because of a disease or a medication.. Persons who have not had chicken-pox can occasionally catch chicken-pox from someone with shingles.. Contact with healthy adults appears safe.

Treatment

Acyclovir (Zovirax) pills can help to control the skin eruption if started early enough after the rash first appears.

The pain can be reduced with aspirin, Tylenol, or Ibuprofen. If these are insufficient, your doctor can prescribe something stronger. Pain is often difficult to control and may persist for weeks or months after the blisters have healed.

While blisters and oozing are present, cool compresses will make you feel more comfortable. Mix ¼ cup of white vinegar into two quarts of water. Soak a washcloth or towel in the solution. Then lightly wring out the towel so it is not dripping. Apply this to the blisters for 10 minutes several times per day. Stop when the blisters have dried up.

If the trunk or extremities are affected, pain may be reduced by covering with cotton and the wrapping firmly with an elastic (ACE) bandage.