



HEALTH INFORMATION

Shingles

What is shingles?

Shingles is an infection of a nerve and the area of skin supplied by the nerve. It is caused by a virus called the varicella-zoster virus. It is the same virus that causes chickenpox. Anyone who has had chickenpox in the past may develop shingles.

How does shingles occur?

Most people have chickenpox at some stage. The virus does not completely go away after you have chickenpox. Some virus particles remain inactive in the nerve roots next to your spinal cord. For reasons that are not clear, the virus may begin to multiply again (reactivate). This is often years later. The reactivated virus travels along the nerve to the skin to cause shingles.

In most cases, an episode of shingles occurs for no apparent reason. Sometimes a period of stress or illness seems to trigger it.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

The virus usually affects only one nerve. The most commonly involved nerves are those supplying the skin on the chest or abdomen. The upper face (including an eye) is also a common site.

- Pain is a localised band of pain. It can be anywhere on your body, depending on which nerve is affected. The pain can range from mild to severe.
- Rash typically appears 2-3 days after the pain begins. Red blotches appear that quickly develop into itchy blisters. The rash looks like chickenpox, but only appears on the band of skin supplied by the affected nerve.

Is shingles contagious?

Yes, you can catch chickenpox from someone with shingles if you have not had chickenpox before. (You cannot get shingles itself from someone who has shingles.) The shingles rash is contagious until all the blisters have scabbed and are dry, if the blisters (vesicles) are covered with a dressing, it is unlikely that the virus will pass on to others.

What are the treatments for shingles?

Two main aims of treating shingles are:

- To ease any pain and discomfort during the episode of shingles.
- To prevent, as much as possible, postherpetic neuralgia (PHN) from developing.

General measures

Loose-fitting cotton clothes are best to reduce irritating the affected area of skin. Pain may be eased by cooling the affected area with ice cubes (wrapped in a plastic bag), wet dressings, or a cool bath.

Painkillers and antiviral drugs

Steroids help to reduce inflammation. A short course of steroid tablets (prednisolone) may be considered in addition to antiviral medication.