

PAINFUL, BUT MANAGEABLE: SHINGLES

Shingles, or herpes zoster, is a viral infection that causes a painful rash. Although shingles can occur anywhere on your body, it most often appears as a single stripe of blisters that wraps around either the left or the right side of your torso.

Shingles is caused by the chickenpox virus. After you've had chickenpox, the virus lies inactive in nerve tissue near your spinal cord and brain. Years later, the virus may reactivate as shingles.

While it isn't a life-threatening condition, shingles can be very painful. The infection most commonly affects older adults and people with weak immune systems.

SYMPTOMS

Early symptoms of shingles include headache, sensitivity to light, and flu-like symptoms without a fever. You may then feel itching, tingling, or pain where a band, strip, or small area of rash may appear several days or weeks later. A rash will first form blisters, then scab over, and finally clear up after a few weeks.

Shingles is not contagious, but there is a small chance that a person with a shingles rash can spread the virus to another person who hasn't had chickenpox and who hasn't gotten the chickenpox vaccine.

TREATMENT

Vaccines can help reduce the risk of shingles, while early treatment can help shorten a shingles infection and lessen the chance of complications. If you think you have shingles, you should see a doctor as soon as possible. Early treatment with antiviral medicines may help reduce pain and prevent complications of shingles, such as disseminated zoster or post-herpetic neuralgia, which is persistent nerve pain after the rash has disappeared.

If you still have symptoms or pain for more than a month after the skin heals, see your doctor to find out whether you have post-herpetic neuralgia. Getting your pain under control right away may prevent nerve damage that may cause pain that lasts for significant periods of time.



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