

HERPES ZOSTER (SHINGLES)

WHAT CAUSES SHINGLES?

Shingles (herpes zoster) is a nerve infection caused by the chicken-pox virus. Shingles results from the reactivation of chicken-pox virus that has remained in your body since you had chicken-pox – perhaps many years ago. Reactivation of the virus may occur after an event that taxes the body’s resources such as an infection, surgery, etc. The virus reactivation is limited to a nerve root. That accounts for the pattern of the rash, which always stops at the body’s midline. The nerve involvement explains the stinging, burning, or pain common in shingles. Some patients have discomfort 3-7 days 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. They may leave some scars.

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

CONTAGION

You don’t have to quarantine yourself. Until your rash has healed, however, you should keep away from persons who have never had the chicken-pox. Small children or infants can catch chicken-pox from someone with shingles. Persons whose resistance to infection is lowered by illness or certain medications, such as cortisone, can also catch chicken-pox. Contact with healthy adults appears safe.

TREATMENT

Acyclovir (Zovirax) by mouth may shorten the length of time that shingles is active. Also, in treating shingles, you can be kept comfortable while nature does the healing. If you have feelings of burning or discomfort, take aspirin or a similar mild painkiller.

If you have much pain, you can be given a prescription painkiller to take until the pain subsides. The pain is caused by neuritis – inflammation of a nerve. The blistering rash usually clears up in a few weeks. The discomfort may last longer.

Don’t open your blisters. You should compress the blisters or crusts for 10 minutes twice daily with a mixture of one-quarter cup of white vinegar and two quarts of lukewarm water. Later, when the crusts and scabs are separating, your skin may become dry, tense, and cracked. If that happens, rub on a small amount of Polysporin or Bacitracin ointment three or four times a day.