

## **Shingles – Varicella Zoster Virus (VZV)**

### **What is Shingles – Varicella Zoster Virus (VZV)?**

Shingles, also called herpes zoster or zoster, is a painful skin rash caused by the varicella zoster virus (VZV). VZV is the same virus that causes chickenpox. After a person recovers from chickenpox, the virus stays in the body. Usually the virus does not cause any problems; however, the virus can reappear years later, causing shingles. Herpes zoster is not caused by the same virus that causes genital herpes, a sexually transmitted disease.

In the United States there are an estimated 1 million cases of shingles each year.

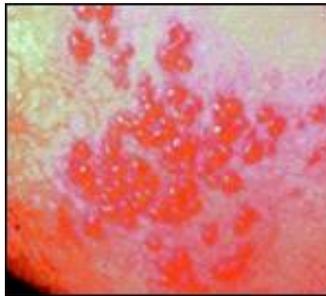
### **How is shingles spread?**

Shingles cannot be passed from one person to another. However, the virus that causes shingles, VZV, can be spread from a person with active shingles to a person who has never had chickenpox through direct contact with the rash. The person exposed would develop chickenpox, not shingles. The virus is **not** spread through sneezing, coughing or casual contact. A person with shingles can spread the disease when the rash is in the blister phase. Once the rash has developed crusts, the person is no longer contagious. A person is not infectious before blisters appear or with post-herpetic neuralgia (pain after the rash is gone).

### **What are the symptoms of shingles?**

Shingles usually starts as a rash on one side of the face or body. The rash starts as blisters that scab after 3-5 days. The rash usually clears within 2-4 weeks.

Before the rash develops, there is often pain, itching, or tingling in the area where the rash will develop. Other symptoms of shingles can include fever, headache, chills, and upset stomach.



Images: Courtesy of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

### **Are certain people at risk of getting shingles?**

Anyone who has recovered from chickenpox may develop shingles, including children. However, shingles most commonly occurs in people 50 years old and older. The risk of getting shingles increases as a person gets older. People who have medical conditions that keep the immune system from working properly, like cancer, leukemia, lymphoma, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), or people who receive immunosuppressive drugs, such as steroids and drugs given after organ transplantation are also at greater risk to get shingles.

### **What is the treatment for shingles?**

Several medicines, acyclovir (Zovirax), valacyclovir (Valtrex), and famciclovir (Famvir), are available to treat shingles. These medications should be started as soon as possible after the rash appears and will help shorten how long the illness lasts and how severe the illness is. Pain medicine may also help with pain caused by shingles.

### **How can shingles be prevented in the healthcare setting?**

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), with support by the Hospital Infection Control Practices Advisory Committee (HICPAC), recommends that healthcare institutions ensure that all healthcare workers have evidence of immunity to varicella. For healthcare providers, evidence of immunity includes any of the following:

- documentation of two doses of varicella vaccine
- blood tests showing immunity to varicella or laboratory confirmation of prior disease or
- receipt from a healthcare provider of a) a diagnosis of chickenpox or herpes zoster (shingles); or b) verification of a history of chickenpox or herpes zoster (shingles)

The risk of spreading shingles is low if the rash is covered. People with shingles should keep the rash covered, not touch or scratch the rash, and wash their hands often to prevent the spread of VZV. Once the rash has developed crusts, the person is no longer contagious.

Other prevention steps healthcare workers can take include:

- Strict adherence to hand hygiene
  - Hand hygiene infection control information for healthcare settings can be found at: <http://www.cdc.gov/handhygiene>.
- Thorough environmental cleaning
  - Guidelines for environmental infection control in healthcare facilities can be found at: [http://www.cdc.gov/hicpac/pdf/guidelines/eic\\_in\\_hcf\\_03.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/hicpac/pdf/guidelines/eic_in_hcf_03.pdf).

For more information regarding shingles, visit the following resources:

- <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/shingles/dis-faqs.htm>
- <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/shingles/vac-faqs.htm>
- <http://www.cdc.gov/hicpac/pdf/MDRO/MDROGuideline2006.pdf> (Management of Multi-drug Resistant Organisms in Healthcare Settings, 2006)