

Shingles

FACT SHEET



Washtenaw County
Health Department

What is shingles?

Shingles (herpes zoster) is a painful skin rash caused by reactivation of the varicella zoster virus that causes chickenpox. The rash appears in irregular lines on the skin following nerve pathways. Anyone that has recovered from chickenpox may develop shingles, but shingles is more common in people over 50 years old. Shingles is also more common in people with medical conditions that keep their immune systems weak, such as certain cancers, HIV and conditions requiring immunosuppressive drugs.

What are the symptoms?

- There may be pain, itching or tingling in an area of the skin before the rash appears.
- Chills, fever, headache and stomach upsets may occur 3 to 4 days before the rash appears.
- A red rash that seems to follow a line-like pattern on the skin.
- 1 or 2 days later the rash changes to fluid filled blisters - these dry in about 5 days.
- Severe pain in the area of the rash.

Possible Complications:

- Pain at the site of the rash may persist for months or years.
- Scarring may occur.
- People with immune problems may have repeated cases of shingles.
- Pneumonia, hearing problems and blindness.

How is it spread?

- A person with shingles cannot give shingles to another person. However, the virus that causes shingles can be spread to someone that has not had chickenpox, causing them to get chickenpox. Spread occurs by direct contact with fluid from blisters of a person with shingles.
- If a person has lesions on more than one area of the body (disseminated herpes zoster) they are able to spread shingles by coughing, sneezing or by contact with fluid from their blisters.
- Once all of the blisters have scabbed, the person is no longer considered infectious.

How is it treated?

- Antiviral drugs may be prescribed.
- Pain relieving medication.
- Over the counter anti-itching cream.

How is it prevented?

- The best way to prevent shingles is to be vaccinated against chicken pox.
- There is now a shingles vaccine for people 50 years of age and older.

Carefully avoid contact by:

- Washing sheets and clothing of the infected person in hot soapy water daily.
- People with shingles should keep the rash covered and not scratch or touch the rash.
- Washing hands often.
- Until rash is scabbed avoid contact with pregnant women, premature babies and people with weak immune systems.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov.