

Shingles (Herpes Zoster):

What you need to know

What is shingles (*herpes zoster*)?

Shingles is caused by the reactivation of the varicella-zoster virus, the **same virus** that causes varicella (chickenpox)! Before someone can develop shingles, they must get varicella first. Once you develop varicella and recover from it, your body does not rid itself of the varicella-zoster virus. Instead, the virus **remains dormant in your body**, specifically in your **nerve roots** (nerves that immediately branch off from your spinal cord). The virus can then **reactivate** later in life, causing **shingles**.

Important clarification!

Although the medical name for shingles is herpes zoster, it is **NOT** a sexually transmitted infection (STI) and cannot cause genital warts or cold sores. The two viruses that do cause genital herpes, which is an STI, are different from the varicella-zoster virus.

What are the symptoms?

Shingles causes a **painful, blister-like rash** that often appears as a stripe on one side of the body, commonly on the torso. The rash can also appear on one side of the face. In rare cases, it can cover a larger portion of the body.

Pain, burning, or tingling associated with shingles usually lessens as it heals, but for some the disease can cause severe nerve pain, which can **last for months – or even years**. This long-term nerve pain is called **post-herpetic neuralgia (PHN)**.

In severe cases, shingles can also lead to complications such as:

- vision loss if the rash spreads to the eyes,
- nerve damage and infection, or
- skin infections/scarring.



How is the varicella-zoster virus spread when someone has shingles?

When you have shingles, you are **not** spreading shingles itself to others, but rather the varicella-zoster virus. This means that anyone who catches the varicella-zoster virus from someone with shingles will develop **varicella (chickenpox) first**. They may then develop shingles later in life if the virus reactivates.

When a person has shingles, other people (who have never had chickenpox) can catch the varicella-zoster virus from that person by coming into direct contact with the liquid from the blisters/rash.

In rare cases where the shingles rash covers a large portion of the body, it is also possible for the varicella-zoster virus to be spread:

1. through the air (e.g., when someone who has shingles coughs or sneezes in the same room as you and you inhale the infected droplets in the air)
2. through close contact with others (e.g., when someone coughs or sneezes next to you and the droplets get on or into your mouth)

Anyone who has been fully immunized against varicella (chickenpox) or who has already had varicella is very unlikely to catch the varicella-zoster virus again.

Who is at risk?

If you have ever had varicella (chickenpox), you are at risk for developing shingles. However, shingles is most common in adults over the age of 50, with **2 out of 3** cases occurring in this age group.

Shingles is also more common in persons who are **immunocompromised** (i.e., who have a weakened immune system).

In general, the risk of developing shingles and experiencing severe illness increases with age. In fact, **up to 10% of people 65 years of age and older** who develop shingles will be hospitalized because of it.

It is also possible to have shingles **more than once** in your life.



Did you know?

It is estimated that every year in Canada, there are 130,000 people who develop shingles and 17,000 people who develop post-herpetic neuralgia (PHN).

Who should be immunized?

All adults 50 years of age and older should be immunized against shingles.

Getting vaccinated against shingles helps prevent the reactivation of the varicella-zoster virus, lowering your risk of developing shingles.

While the shingles vaccine is highly effective, it is still possible for immunized persons to get shingles. However, shingles infection is usually milder in people who received the vaccine; it is also less likely they will experience severe complications such as post-herpetic neuralgia.

Are you protected against shingles?



Shingles vaccines are safe and the most effective way to protect against shingles infection.

Talk to your doctor, nurse, pharmacist or public health office about getting the shingles vaccine.

References

Public Health Agency of Canada. (2024.) Canadian Immunization Guide. Herpes zoster (shingles) vaccine.

[https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/canadian-immunization-guide-part-4-active-vaccines/page-8-herpes-zoster-\(shingles\)-vaccine.html](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/canadian-immunization-guide-part-4-active-vaccines/page-8-herpes-zoster-(shingles)-vaccine.html)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023.) Shingles (Herpes Zoster).

<https://www.cdc.gov/shingles/index.html>

Cleveland Clinic. (2022.) Shingles.

<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/11036-shingles>

Mayo Clinic. (2022.) Shingles.

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/shingles/symptoms-causes/syc-20353054>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022.) Genital Herpes – CDC Basic Fact Sheet.

<https://www.cdc.gov/std/herpes/stdfact-herpes.htm>

American Association of Neurological Surgeons. (n.d.) Anatomy of the Spine and Peripheral Nervous System.

<https://www.aans.org/en/Patients/Neurosurgical-Conditions-and-Treatments/Anatomy-of-the-Spine-and-Peripheral-Nervous-System>