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## Folks over 50 at risk for shingles



Have you ever had shingles?

If you are over 50 and had chickenpox in the past or even the vaccine to prevent chickenpox, you are at risk to develop shingles.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention there are about 1 million cases of shingles reported each year.

Luckily there is a new vaccine that can prevent shingles and is approved by the Food and Drug Administration.

### What is Shingles?

Once you have been exposed to and recovered from chickenpox, the virus remains inactive in your body's nerve cells. In some people, especially older adults, the virus can reactivate and this is called shingles.

Generally symptoms begin with a tingling, itching, and painful feeling on your skin. Symptoms will occur usually on your face or chest.

As shingles progresses, a red rash forms. Along with the rash, painful blisters will develop. You may also notice a fever, chills, headache, or an upset stomach.

If you have not already received the shingles vaccine and develop the symptoms listed above, it is important to see your physician. In order to decrease the length and severity of shingles, you should seek treatment early as shingles can last from two to five weeks.

With shingles your doctor may prescribe antiviral medications like acyclovir, valacyclovir, or famciclovir. If you have severe pain, the doctor may also prescribe medication to manage your symptoms.

Without treatment, there are several complications that can develop including pneumonia, hearing problems, and even blindness. Some individuals, especially in older populations, suffer from pain even after the rash is gone. This is called post-herpetic neuralgia.

### Am I Contagious?

Once you have shingles you may worry about spreading the virus to others. Shingles is only contagious while you still have blisters and can only be spread to a person with no history of chickenpox.

After direct touching of the rash with a person who has never had chickenpox, your virus can be spread to them as chickenpox. In order to prevent passing the virus, you may want to cover blistered areas. Shingles is

not spread through sneezing or coughing.

As always, frequent hand washing is the best way to prevent the spread of the virus. Remember that your friends and family cannot develop shingles by being in the same room as someone with shingles.

### Preventative Practice

Individuals at risk for developing shingles include older adults and people with a weak immune system. Current research has shown that you can prevent shingles and its painful complications by receiving the herpes zoster vaccine (Zostavax).

The vaccine is given in your upper arm and the CDC recommends a one time dose with no need for a booster vaccination. After the shot you may feel some soreness, itching, or note redness at the injection site. You may also feel a slight headache. An allergic reaction may occur but it is uncommon.

The cost of the vaccine is usually around \$150 per dose, but may be covered by your insurance plan.

- If you have an insurance plan call the number on the back of your card in order to inquire about coverage for the shingles vaccine.
- If you do not have an additional insurance plan you can discuss options with your pharmacist or doctor.
- Further information can be found by calling the Allegheny County Health Department at 412-687-ACHD.

The herpes zoster vaccination is now recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for anyone over 60 years of age because as you age your risk increases. It can be a simple and relatively painless way to prevent the often very painful and debilitating shingles virus.

At your next healthcare appointment, talk to your doctor about being vaccinated in order to protect yourself.

For specific information about the shingles vaccine you can visit [www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/shingles/default.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/shingles/default.htm).

**--MORE ON PAGE 2--**

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