

“I’m not sure if I am at risk for shingles. What can I do to prevent it?”

Nearly one out of every three people in the United States will develop shingles in their lifetime, but there is a safe and easy vaccine that may keep you from getting it.

Who can get shingles?

Shingles is caused by the varicella-zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox. The virus lies inactive in nerve tissue for many years after someone has recovered from chickenpox. If the virus reactivates, it produces shingles instead of causing another case of chickenpox.

There is no way of knowing who will get shingles. It is most common in people over age 50, and the risk increases as you get older. People who have weak immune systems are also at an increased risk of getting shingles. Most people get shingles only one time, but it is possible to have it more than once.

What does it look like?

Shingles is a painful rash that develops on one side of the face or body. Most cases of shingles last three to five weeks.

- About one to five days before a rash appears, burning, itching or tingling pain may occur on one side of the body.
- A few days later, the rash will turn into fluid-filled blisters.
- About a week to 10 days after that, the blisters dry up and crust over.
- A couple of weeks later, the scabs clear up.

People who have, or think they might have, shingles should call their health care provider as soon as possible to discuss treatment options. Several antiviral medicines are available that may shorten the length and minimize the severity of the illness. Shingles cannot be passed from one person to another. But the virus that causes shingles can spread to cause chickenpox in someone who has never had chickenpox or has not received the chickenpox vaccine.

Complications

The most common complication of shingles is postherpetic neuralgia (PHN). People with PHN have severe pain in the areas where they had the shingles rash, even after the rash clears up. The pain from PHN usually resolves in a few weeks or months. Some people, however, can have pain for many years.

Other problems may occur after shingles has cleared up. Blisters may become infected or leave a scar. Shingles located near the eyes may cause eye damage or problems with vision. See your doctor right away if you notice blisters on your face.

Shingles vaccine

You should get the shingles vaccine even if you have already had shingles or don’t remember having chickenpox. It is recommended for healthy adults 50 years of age and older. The vaccine is available in pharmacies and doctor’s offices. Talk with your health care professional.

For more information about shingles, visit fallonhealth.org, click on Healthwise® Knowledgebase under Quick links, and search “Shingles”.

