



# Patient Information

## The Story on Shingles

Shingles (**shing-guhlz**) affects up to 1 million Americans every year. It is an outbreak of rash or blisters on the surface of the skin. The rash, which affects 1 side of the body and appears in a band, a strip, or a small area, is caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox, herpes zoster virus. Chickenpox usually develops in childhood, but after recovering from it, the virus “sleeps” in your nerve roots permanently.

For some, the virus won’t cause any more symptoms or illness, but, for others, the virus “wakes up.” This happens when your immune system is weakened. However, after the virus becomes active, it can only cause shingles.

Pain usually accompanies a shingles outbreak. In some cases, painkillers may be needed to alleviate the discomfort. However, when the blisters heal, the pain will lessen.

### How do I know if I’m at risk?

If you have had chickenpox, you are at risk of shingles, since the virus permanently lives within you. Shingles cannot be passed to other people; however, if someone has a shingles rash, the virus can cause chickenpox in another person.

People older than 50 years of age, and people with weakened immune systems due to stress, injury, or certain medicines, are more prone to shingles. Some medical treatments and illnesses also can weaken the immune system and increase the risk of shingles; they include cancer, HIV/AIDS, medication for organ transplant, and cortisone.

### What are the warning signs?

Signs of shingles occur in stages. First, you may experience a headache and sensitivity to light. You also may experience flu-like symptoms, but not have a fever.

Then, you may feel burning, or a pain that tingles. In some cases, you may experience numbness or itching in the infected area. After several days of experiencing these symptoms, you will begin to notice a rash of fluid-filled blisters, similar to chickenpox, in that area. After the blisters fill with fluid, they break, forming ulcers. These open blisters are contagious, and if touched by someone who has not had chickenpox before, they will be at risk. Once the outbreak forms scabs, you are no longer contagious. The crust falls off after 2 to 3 weeks, leaving minimal to no scarring.

Dizziness or weakness may occur because of the disease. If the rash spreads to your face, lasts long term, or you have changes in your vision or thought process, contact your doctor immediately, because they are serious adverse affects.

If the pain lasts for months, or years, you may have postherpetic neuralgia (PHN). This occurs when the nerves are damaged after a shingles outbreak. PHN ranges from mild to severe, and is more common in people older than 60 years of age.

### What tests do I need?

Tests to determine shingles are rarely needed; your doctor can visually make the diagnosis of shingles. However, a skin sample of the infected area may be needed to solidify that it is the virus. They also will ask questions about your medical history.



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If symptoms of shingles are not apparent, your doctor may prescribe other tests to make a firm diagnosis. A virus culture takes specimens from the blister, fluid from inside the blister, or, in some cases, spinal fluid.

A polymerase chain reaction (PCR) technique also may be used to diagnose the virus. PCR uses a piece of the DNA of the virus, replicated millions of times until it is detected. This procedure is quite expensive, but proves to be useful in unusual cases since it is the most sensitive and specific test available.

### How can I avoid the problem?

If you have never had chickenpox, you can receive a chickenpox vaccine, approved by the FDA in 1995. This vaccine will prevent chickenpox, and decrease the chances of developing shingles as an adult. Currently, there are studies for a similar vaccine that may prevent shingles in adults who previously have had chickenpox.

If you have never had chickenpox, avoid touching someone with shingles or chickenpox. People over the age of 60 years can get a vaccine that helps prevent shingles, or make the outbreak less painful if it is developed. This vaccine reduces the chance of shingles by about 50%. Although there is still a chance of shingles, it has shown to reduce the risk of PHN after the rash has healed.

Shingles cannot be prevented, but keeping your immune system healthy can help prevent the virus from becoming active. Eating healthy, exercising regularly, and minimizing stress can help your immune system remain healthy.

### How is it treated?

No cure for shingles exists, but immediate treatment with antiviral drugs can severely

reduce the symptoms and duration of the disease. If you feel any warning signs of shingles, call your doctor immediately. Your doctor may prescribe medication, such as acyclovir, valacyclovir, or famciclovir. These medications will start within 24 hours, and work best if taken before the blisters appear.

If treated soon after the outbreak of blisters, the pain should subside within 3 to 5 weeks. Generally, if you have had shingles once, you will not get it again.

At-home care can help reduce the severity of shingles. Keep skin sores clean; wash healing blisters with mild soap and water, and keep them moist with petroleum jelly to prevent scab formation. Diligent wound care will decrease the possibility of residual scarring.

Do not reuse contaminated items. Items that are nondisposable can be washed in boiling water, or disinfected in another way, before reuse.

In some cases, your doctor may be able to recommend an over-the-counter medicine to relieve the pain. Cold compresses also can help reduce the pain, while soothing baths and lotions may help to relieve itching and discomfort.

For more information on shingles, visit the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Web site at <http://www.niaid.nih.gov/topics/shingles/pages/default.aspx>.

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