

# AgePage

## Shingles

*Ruth's shingles caused so much pain she couldn't bear to put on her clothes or have the sheets touch her skin. Her shingles symptoms lasted for several months.*

*Sarah had it easier. Shingles only made her feel sick for a few days. She felt a little itchy for a while, but she was back to her old self in a few weeks.*

### What Is Shingles?

Shingles is a disease that affects your nerves. It can cause burning, shooting pain, tingling, and/or itching, as well as a rash and blisters.

You may recall having chickenpox as a child. Shingles is caused by the same virus, the varicella-zoster virus (VZV). After you recover from chickenpox, the virus continues to live in some of your nerve cells. It is usually inactive, so you don't even know it's there.

In fact, most adults live with VZV in their bodies and never get shingles. But, for about one in three adults, the virus will become active again. Instead

of causing another case of chickenpox, it produces shingles. We do not totally understand what makes the virus go from inactive to active.

Having shingles doesn't mean you have any other underlying disease.

### How Do You Get Shingles?

Everyone who has had chickenpox has VZV in their body and is at risk for getting shingles. Right now, there is no way of knowing who will get the disease. But, some things make it more likely:

■ **Advanced age.** The risk of getting shingles increases as you age. People may have a harder time fighting off infections as they get older. About half of all shingles cases are in adults age 60 or older. The chance of getting shingles becomes much greater by age 70.

■ **Trouble fighting infections.** Your immune system is the part of your body that responds to infections. Age can affect your immune system. So can an HIV infection, cancer, cancer treatments, too much sun, or organ transplant drugs. Even stress or a cold can weaken your immune system for a short time. These all can put you at risk for shingles.

### Can You Catch Shingles?

Shingles is not contagious. You can't catch it from someone. But, you

can catch chickenpox from someone with shingles. So, if you've never had chickenpox, try to stay away from anyone who has shingles.

If you have shingles, try to stay away from anyone who has not had chickenpox or who might have a weak immune system.

## What Are the Symptoms of Shingles?

Usually, shingles develops only on one side of the body or face and in a small area rather than all over. The most common place for shingles is a band that goes around one side of your waistline.

Most people have some of the following shingles symptoms:

- Burning, tingling, or numbness of the skin
- Feeling sick—chills, fever, upset stomach, or headache
- Fluid-filled blisters
- Skin that is sensitive to touch
- Mild itching to strong pain

Depending on where shingles develops, it could also cause symptoms like hiccups or even loss of vision.

For some people, the symptoms of shingles are mild. They might just have some itching. For others, shingles can cause intense pain that can be felt from the gentlest touch or breeze.

## How Long Does Shingles Last?

Most cases of shingles last 3 to 5 weeks. Shingles follows a pattern:

- The first sign is often burning or tingling pain; sometimes, it includes numbness or itching on one side of the body.
- Somewhere between 1 and 5 days after the tingling or burning feeling on the skin, a red rash will appear.
- 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.

Most people get shingles only one time. But, it is possible to have it more than once.

## Long-Term Pain and Other Lasting Problems

After the shingles rash goes away, some people may be left with ongoing pain called post-herpetic neuralgia or PHN. The pain is felt in the area where the rash had been. For some people, PHN is the longest lasting and worst part of shingles. The older you are when you get shingles, the greater your chance of developing PHN.

The PHN pain can cause depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, and weight loss.

Some people with PHN find it hard to go about their daily activities, like dressing, cooking, and eating. Talk with your doctor if you have any of these problems.

There are medicines that may help with PHN. Steroids may lessen the pain and shorten the time you're sick. Analgesics, antidepressants, and anticonvulsants may also reduce the pain. Usually, PHN will get better over time.

Some people have other problems that last after shingles has cleared up. For example, the blisters caused by shingles can become infected. They may also leave a scar. It is important to keep the area clean and try not to scratch the blisters. Your doctor can prescribe an antibiotic treatment if needed.

See your doctor *right away* if you notice blisters on your face—this is an urgent problem. Blisters near or in the eye can cause lasting eye damage or blindness. Hearing loss, a brief paralysis of the face, or, very rarely, swelling of the brain (encephalitis) can also occur.

## Have a Rash? Go to the Doctor

If you think you might have shingles, talk to your doctor as soon as possible. It's important to see your doctor no later than 3 days after the rash starts. The doctor will confirm whether or not you have shingles and can make a treatment plan. Although there is no

cure for shingles, early treatment with drugs that fight the virus can help the blisters dry up faster and limit severe pain. Shingles can often be treated at home. People with shingles rarely need to stay in a hospital.

## Should You Get the Shingles Vaccine?

The shingles vaccine is a safe and easy, one-time shot that may keep you from getting shingles. Most people age 60 and older should get vaccinated. You should get the shot even if you have already had shingles or don't remember having chickenpox. However, if you have a weak immune system or allergies to certain medicines, make sure to check with your doctor first.

You can get the shingles vaccine at your doctor's office and at some pharmacies. All Medicare Part D plans and most private health insurance plans will cover the cost.

## What Can You Do About Shingles?

If you have shingles, here are some tips that might help you feel better:

- Get plenty of rest and eat well-balanced meals.
- Try simple exercises like stretching or walking. Check with your doctor before starting a new exercise routine.

- Apply a cool washcloth to your blisters to ease the pain and help dry the blisters.
- Do things that take your mind off your pain. For example, watch TV, read, talk with friends, listen to relaxing music, or work on a hobby you like.
- Avoid stress. It can make the pain worse.
- Wear loose-fitting, natural-fiber clothing.
- Take an oatmeal bath or use calamine lotion to see if it soothes your skin.
- Share your feelings about your pain with family and friends. Ask for their understanding.

Also, you can limit spreading the virus by:

- Keeping the rash covered
- Not touching or scratching the rash
- Washing your hands often

## For More Information About Shingles

### **American Chronic Pain Association**

1-800-533-3231 (toll-free)  
 acpa@theacpa.org (email)  
[www.theacpa.org](http://www.theacpa.org)

### **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**

1-800-232-4636 (toll-free)  
 1-888-232-6348 (TTY/toll-free)  
 cdcinfo@cdc.gov (email)  
[www.cdc.gov/shingles](http://www.cdc.gov/shingles)

### **National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke**

1-800-352-9424 (toll-free)  
 braininfo@ninds.nih.gov (email)  
[www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/All-Disorders/Shingles-Information-Page](http://www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/All-Disorders/Shingles-Information-Page)

### **National Shingles Foundation**

1-212-222-3390  
 shingles@shinglesfoundation.org (email)  
[www.vzvfoundation.org](http://www.vzvfoundation.org)

For more information on health and aging, contact:

### **National Institute on Aging Information Center**

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 Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057  
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