

Shingles

What is shingles?

Shingles is a condition that produces a rash caused by the Varicella Zoster virus. When infected by this virus for the first time it causes chicken pox – a rash that has small blisters (called vesicles) spread widely over the body that is very itchy. Most likely you experienced this as a child. When the virus reactivates in later years the rash is usually limited to one region of the body – this can be on the face, torso or on a limb. The shingles rash is not as itchy as chickenpox. It is often associated with a strong aching pain over the region where the rash is located.

Most people who develop shingles are over 50 years of age. Those at increased risk may have chronic medical conditions or may take medications that suppress their immune system – such as steroids or therapies commonly used to treat cancers. Young healthy people can still get shingles, having an increased risk if becoming run down sufficiently to affect their immune system.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptoms are a blistering rash, and pain in the same region as the rash. There are often groups of blisters in clumps close to each other. In many cases the pain starts the day before onset of the rash. It is also usual to feel very fatigued and generally unwell during the first week of shingles.

Treatment

Shingles that is treated with antiviral medication started within the first 72 hours of symptom onset has been shown to reduce the duration of the pain and of the rash.

There are some people who develop shingles who need additional specialist review and care. This includes when shingles involves the eye or ear, is more widespread over the whole body, or if shingles occurs during pregnancy or childhood.

It is important to treat the pain with medications for pain relief to decrease the risk of the pain becoming more established and chronic. There are many analgesic options for pain relief – your health care professional will guide you on which of these are most appropriate for you.

Post herpetic neuralgia

Post herpetic neuralgia is a term used to describe the pain from shingles that persists for longer than 4 to 6 weeks after the crusting over then resolution of the vesicular rash. It is more common in those aged over 70 years and can be severe and

debilitating. It can be felt as a burning, aching or boring pain, or as shock-like stabbing pain. There are options to treat this pain with approaches that include several different classes of medications as well as non-pharmacological treatments such as transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS).

How infective is shingles?

Shingles is not 'caught' from another person as the virus remains present in the body after the first episode that caused chicken pox symptoms. Instead shingles is a reactivation of the same virus. The rash is still infectious to others who have not had contact with the virus before – those people who have not had chicken pox. To avoid transmitting the varicella virus it is important to isolate at home while infectious. Unlike many viruses the infection is not transmitted by coughing or sneezing, but from contact with the fluid from the rash – this includes direct contact when hugging, but also contact with soiled sheets and clothes. The infectious period is completed when the vesicles have crusted over.

Shingles vaccination

Vaccination of adults has been shown to reduce the incidence and severity of shingles infection and post herpetic neuralgia. Vaccination 'reminds' the immune system of the specific antibodies it employs to minimise the chance of the shingles virus reactivating. There are several different types of vaccines available which have different rates of effectiveness according to age group. Your general practitioner and pharmacist can both advise you of which vaccine may be right for you.

Vaccination may be used to prevent or decrease the severity of illness if given to susceptible contacts within five days (preferably within the first 72 hours) of first exposure. There are high risk special groups when vaccination is not possible such as when pregnant, in the newborn, and when receiving some chemotherapy agents – for these groups there is an option to receive immunoglobulin and follow up with vaccination when safe to do so.

Home care

It is important to rest at home during the time you have shingles and are feeling unwell. Isolate from others until the rash has crusted over, particularly from those who have not had the Varicella Zoster virus before or who are pregnant, newborn or have decreased immune system function. Review with your general practitioner during the illness as needed and follow any instructions given regarding antiviral and pain relief medications.

Alan, Ada and Eva Selwyn Emergency Department
24 hours, 7 days a week
183 Wattleree Road, Malvern, VIC 3144
(03) 9508 1500 | www.cabrini.com.au



Seeking help

Cabrini Emergency Department (ED) is staffed by experienced emergency doctors and nurses 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you have any questions about your ED treatment our qualified ED staff can be contacted on **(03) 9508 1500** at any time. If you need to return to Cabrini ED for ongoing care we would be glad to take care of you again and if this occurs within a week of your initial consultation the doctor's fee will be bulk-billed.

You can also expect to receive a phone call or SMS message from one of our emergency nurses the day after you have been discharged. The nurse will be able to clarify any aspect of your diagnosis, treatment, or follow-up.

In a medical emergency return to Cabrini ED if it is safe to do so or go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

Return to Cabrini ED if:

- **You have severe pain not responding to medications prescribed for pain relief**
- **The rash spreads over the body area more generally (not contained to just one region)**
- **You develop a fever >38 degrees**
- **You are not managing with self-care at home**
- **Symptoms are getting worse, or do not resolve over the following week**

Want to know more?

- Contact Cabrini ED on **(03) 9508 1500**
- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au