



NL Health Services

Infection Prevention and Control

FACT SHEET

Shingles (Herpes Zoster)



What are shingles?

Shingles is a viral infection caused by the same virus as chickenpox (varicella zoster). After the symptoms of chickenpox disappear, the virus remains inactive in the body. When the virus reactivates, it is called shingles. Reactivation may be caused when an individual's immune system is weakened due to illness or age. Individuals who have had chickenpox are at risk for shingles. Individuals who are 50+ years of age or those who are immune compromised are at a greater risk of getting shingles. Most individuals only have shingles once in a lifetime; however, it is possible to have it again.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

- Itching, tingling, burning, or pain in a specific area.
- In 2-3 days, blisters will appear, usually on one side of the body or face with new blisters appearing for 1 week.
- In 2-4 weeks, the blisters will dry out and crust over.
- When the rash is at its peak, symptoms will range from mild itching to severe pain. As the rash heals, the pain usually lessens.
- If you have shingles near your eye, it is important to see your physician.

How are shingles spread?

- The virus is present in the fluid of the shingles blisters. It is spread through direct contact with these blisters. Ensure that shingles blisters are covered with a dressing to help prevent the spread to others.
- If you have not had chickenpox or have not been vaccinated for chickenpox, the virus will cause chickenpox, not shingles.

How can I protect myself against shingles?

- The shingles vaccine is the best protection against the virus. Adults 50+ years should get the vaccine. Ask your health care provider if the vaccine is right for you.
- If you are immune compromised or receive cancer treatment, check with your specialist before getting vaccinated.

Do shingles cause complications?

The most common complication from shingles is persistent pain which can last for weeks or months. The chance of having this complication increases with age.

What can I do if I have shingles?

- Antiviral medications are available that reduce the symptoms, severity, and duration of the infection. You should discuss this with your health care provider.
- If you are having pain, tell your health care provider who may prescribe pain medication.
- Take medication as directed.
- Avoid perfumed soaps.
- Keep the rash clean and dry.
- Rest, drink fluids, and eat well.
- Do not touch or scratch the rash. This can cause infection, delay healing, and leave scars.
- Keep blisters covered where possible.
- Always remember to wash your hands if you touch the blisters.