

Are You at Risk for

KEEP READING, BECAUSE THE ANSWER IS PROBABLY YES. HERE ARE THE ESSENTIAL THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT THE VIRUS.

BY JEANNETTE MONINGER

Is it likely I'll get it?

If you've had chicken pox (and 99% of Americans age 40 and older have), you can develop shingles. "Your risk increases with age, as overall immunity to any ailment drops," says Anne Louise Oaklander, M.D., associate professor of neurology at Harvard Medical School. You have a one-in-three chance of getting shingles during your lifetime. Those odds go up if your immune system is compromised or you are experiencing a prolonged period of stress.

How painful is it?

While the severity of symptoms varies from person to person, many women rank the intensity right up there with childbirth and kidney stones. "The virus spreads down your sensory nerves to your skin, which can cause extreme pain," says Oaklander. It could be mild or it could be more intense. For Wendy Crichton, a Denver resident who was diagnosed with shingles at age 43, the pain was "like a repeated knife stab in the back." Even the feel of a sheet against her skin became too much to bear.

Can I prevent it?

The shingles vaccine reduces the risk of contracting the disease by half in older adults and minimizes symptoms should you still become sick. However, it's only recommended for those 60 or older, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). That's because older people are most at risk for

shingles complications, including chronic, debilitating pain called postherpetic neuralgia (PHN), says Wilbur Chen, M.D., assistant professor of medicine at the University of Maryland's School of Medicine's Center for Vaccine Development. Although the Food and Drug Administration approved the vaccine for people in their 50s, you'd need to consult with your M.D. and your insurance company, since it might not be covered, meaning you'd have to pay about \$200 out of pocket for the shot.

What should I do if I get the virus?

Early treatment is critical, so it's important to recognize the symptoms (see Shingles Time Line, below). Prescription antiviral medications given at the early onset of symptoms can prevent or reduce severe pain and heal blisters faster.

The same drugs halve the risk of PHN. Because you can have shingles more than once, you should get the Zostavax (shingles) vaccine as soon your doctor advises—even if you've already had the ailment. Studies suggest the vaccine is effective for at least six years, and the need for boosters is being researched.

Is my family at risk if I get sick?

You can't infect someone with shingles. But you can pass along the chicken pox virus—which causes shingles—to those who haven't had chicken pox or received the varicella (chicken pox) vaccine. The virus spreads through direct contact (with blisters). So if your kids or husband haven't had chicken pox, avoid direct contact or isolate yourself (perhaps by staying in one room) so that you don't pass the disease on to them.

Shingles /'shɪŋ-ɡəlz/ n. Also called herpes zoster, this disease occurs when, for unknown reasons, the chicken pox virus reactivates in your nervous system. It mostly affects adults and is more painful and debilitating than the chicken pox you experienced as a child. On rare occasions, kids who've had chicken pox get shingles.

>>>>>>>>>> SHINGLES TIME LINE <<<<<<<<<<<

FIRST SIGNS An unexplained burning sensation, tingling pain or itch on just one side of the back, chest, rib cage, waist or face. This can last for weeks, but usually just several days. You also may feel feverish, achy, tired or have a headache.

WEEK 1 A rash of pus-filled blisters clustered as a band or stripe (called a dermatome) appears on one side of your chest, back or face (although the bumps may crop up anywhere). The burning sensation in the rash area is accompanied by mild to severe pain and itching.

WEEK 2
Rash blisters break open, scab over and start to heal.

WEEKS 3 TO 4 Scabs fall off and the rash begins to fade.

WEEK 4 AND BEYOND Pain and itch diminish, although they can last for months, sometimes years.

SHINGLES?

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