

What to Do If You Get Shingles

Shingles (herpes zoster) is a skin disorder triggered by the chicken pox virus which is thought to lie dormant in the spinal cord until later in life. (The adult form does not appear to be contagious, but infants and people whose immunity is low should not be exposed to it.)

The risk of getting shingles increases with age. Most often, it occurs in people over age 50. The risk for shingles is also higher in those who have an illness or take medicine that suppresses the immune system.

Symptoms of shingles include:

1. •Pain, itching, or tingling sensation before a rash appears.
2. •A rash of painful red blisters which later crust over. Usually, the rash appears on one side of the torso or face and sometimes affects the eye.
3. •Though rare, fever and general weakness sometimes occur.

After the crusts fall off (usually within three weeks), pain can persist in the area of the rash. This usually goes away within one to six months. Chronic pain (post-herpetic neuralgia) can last longer, even for years. The older you are, the greater the chance that this is the case. The recovery time may also take longer.

The following steps may relieve an active outbreak of shingles.

1. •Keep sores open to the air. Don't bandage them or wear restrictive clothing.
2. •Wash blisters, but never scrub them. Apply cool compresses, calamine lotion, or baking soda to relieve itching.

Shingles requires medical care, especially if an eye is affected. A prescribed oral antiviral medicine is effective if started within 24 to 72 hours after the rash first appears. Your doctor may also prescribe pain relievers, antihistamines, or possibly corticosteroids. A vaccine may prevent shingles or lessen its symptoms. The vaccine is advised for persons age 60 and older who have had chicken pox, but have not had shingles.