



HERPES ZOSTER (SHINGLES)

DEFINITION

Shingles (herpes zoster) is a nerve and skin infection caused by reactivation of the chicken pox virus. The rash begins as red patches that soon develop water blisters. The blisters may remain small or become very large. They usually heal in 2-4 weeks and may leave some mild scarring. The viral reactivation is limited to a nerve root which accounts for the pattern of the rash, which often stops at the body's midline. Nerve involvement also explains the stinging, burning, and pain common in shingles. Some patients have discomfort before the rash appears. Shingles is caused by varicella zoster virus and is NOT related to the herpes simplex virus that causes cold sores or genital herpes.

Until the rash has healed, affected patients should keep away from persons who have never had chicken pox. Children can catch chicken pox from someone with shingles. People with lowered immune systems due to cancer chemotherapy, AIDS, or certain medications can also catch shingles. Contact with healthy adults appears safe.

TREATMENT

Treatment is aimed at keeping patients comfortable. Motrin or a similar anti-inflammatory medication can be used to help with the burning and discomfort caused by nerve inflammation. Antiviral pills such as Acyclovir, Valtrex, or Famvir taken for 7-10 days appear to decrease scarring and lessen pain, but may not help the blisters to heal any faster. Side effects are rare and may include upset stomach, dizziness, or headache.

Do not open blisters. If you have large blisters or weeping crusts, you should compress blisters and crusting for 5-15 minutes twice daily with Domeboro solution (available without a prescription and mixed according to directions on the box). Dilute vinegar soaks may also help to dry blisters. Continue soaks until blisters have dried and weeping stopped. If crusts and scabs then become dry, tense, or cracked, you can rub areas with small amounts of Polysporin antibiotic ointment three times daily. If infection involves the face, an ophthalmologist should check the eyes, as eye involvement can cause permanent damage.

POST HERPETIC NEURALGIA

Shingles is gone once the blisters clear. However, just like the skin may get visible scars, the nerves under the skin can get scarring as well. When a nerve gets scar tissue around it, one may notice numbness, tingling, itching, or even severe pain. This condition is called post herpetic neuralgia and is a disease of the nerve, not the skin. Over the counter Zostrix or LMX cream may help to relieve minor pain. Oral medication or consultation with a neurologist or pain clinic may be necessary if pain is not controlled by simple means. The antiviral medications Acyclovir, Valtrex, and Famvir, when taken early in the course of shingles, may prevent the occurrence of severe post herpetic neuralgia.

SHINGLES VACCINE: We recommend the shingles vaccine for all of our healthy patients over 50 years of age. This can be gotten without a prescription from your local health department or most pharmacies.

