

## Wellness Articles

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**Proposed publication date:** Aug. 1, 2022  
**Content provided by:** Alberta Health Services

## Learn more about shingles

Shingles is a painful skin rash. It is caused by the varicella zoster virus. Shingles usually appears in a band, a strip, or a small area on one side of the face or body. It is also called herpes zoster.

Shingles is most common in older adults and people who have weak immune systems because of stress, injury, certain medicines, or other reasons. Most people who get shingles will get better and will not get it again. But it is possible to get shingles more than once.

### What causes shingles?

Shingles occurs when the virus that causes chickenpox starts up again in your body. After you get better from chickenpox, the virus "sleeps" (is dormant) in your nerve roots. In some people, it stays dormant forever. In others, the virus "wakes up" when disease, stress, or aging weakens the immune system. Some medicines may trigger the virus to wake up and cause a shingles rash. It is not clear why this happens. But after the virus becomes active again, it can only cause shingles, not chickenpox.

There is a small chance that a person with a shingles rash can spread the virus to another person who hasn't had chickenpox and who hasn't gotten the chickenpox vaccine.

### What are the symptoms?

Shingles symptoms happen in stages. At first you may have a headache or be sensitive to light. You may also feel like you have the flu but not have a fever.

Later, you may feel itching, tingling, or pain in a certain area. That's where a band, strip, or small area of rash may occur a few days later. The rash turns into clusters of blisters. The blisters fill with fluid and then crust over. It takes two to four weeks for the blisters to heal, and they may leave scars. Some people only get a mild rash. And some do not get a rash at all. It's possible that you could also feel dizzy or weak. Or you could have pain or a rash on your face, changes in your vision, changes in how well you can think, or a rash that spreads. A rash or blisters on your face, especially near an eye or on the tip of your nose, can be a warning of eye problems.

Call your doctor now if you think you may have shingles. It's best to get early treatment.

Medicine can help your symptoms get better sooner. And if you have shingles near your eye or

nose, see your doctor right away. Shingles that gets into the eye can cause permanent eye damage.

## **How is shingles treated?**

Shingles is treated with medicines. These medicines include antiviral medicines and medicines for pain.

See your doctor right away if you think you may have shingles. Starting antiviral medicine right away can help your rash heal faster and be less painful. And you may need prescription pain medicine if your case of shingles is very painful.

Good home care also can help you feel better faster. Take care of any skin sores, and keep them clean. Take your medicines as directed. If you are bothered by pain, tell your doctor. Other treatments may help with intense pain.

## **Who gets shingles?**

Anyone who has had chickenpox can get shingles. You have a greater chance of getting shingles if you are older than 50 or if you have a weak immune system.

There is a shingles vaccine for adults. It lowers your chances of getting shingles and prevents long-term pain that can occur after shingles. And if you do get shingles, having the vaccine makes it more likely that you will have less pain and your rash will clear up more quickly. Call Health Link at 811 to find out more, or speak with your family healthcare provider.