

Shingles

What is shingles?

Shingles (also called herpes zoster) is a painful rash that happens when the chickenpox virus (varicella-zoster virus) is reactivated in the body.

Shingles mainly affects adults and typically occurs many years after having chickenpox.

For more information about chickenpox see the [Chickenpox Fact Sheet](#).

What are the symptoms of shingles?

Shingles starts as a pain or a tingling sensation on one side of the body, that goes on to a red rash with small, fluid-filled blisters.

Other symptoms may include:

- sensitivity to touch
- itching.

Pain and tingling in the area of the rash may continue for weeks or months after the rash has gone away (known as post-herpetic neuralgia).

How is shingles spread?

You cannot catch shingles from someone who has shingles. However, you can catch chickenpox from someone with shingles if you:

- have not had chickenpox, and
- have not been vaccinated against chickenpox.

Shingles can lead to chickenpox through direct contact with the fluid from shingles rash blisters. People are infectious until all the blisters are crusted.

Unlike chickenpox, shingles does not spread through coughing or sneezing.

See the chickenpox fact sheet for more information.

People at higher risk of illness from shingles

Shingles can occur at any age. However, the risk of having shingles increases with older age and if the immune system becomes weakened.

Most people who get shingles only have it once. However, sometimes shingles can occur more than once.

How is shingles prevented?

Shingles can be prevented by vaccination.

Shingles vaccination is recommended for:

- all adults aged 50 years and older
- people aged 18 years and older with a weak immune system.

A free two-dose course of shingles vaccine is available under the National Immunisation Program (NIP) for:

- all adults aged 65 years and older
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 50 years and older.
- people with a weak immune system aged 18 years and older.

Some providers may charge a fee for consultation or to administer the vaccine.

Vaccination is still recommended for people who have had shingles. However, there should be at least 12 months between having shingles and having the vaccine.

People with a weak immune system should discuss shingles vaccination with their doctor as they may be recommended to get the vaccine as early as 3 months after getting shingles.

Talk to your doctor or immunisation provider for advice on shingles vaccination.

How is shingles diagnosed?

A doctor may diagnose shingles based on your symptoms and by the appearance of the rash. Sometimes the diagnosis is confirmed by testing samples taken from the rash.

How is shingles treated?

Shingles may be treated with antiviral medicines. Antiviral medicines can help to reduce the severity and duration of symptoms. They work best when taken as soon as possible after the rash appears.

Contact your doctor if you have any shingles symptoms. This is very important if the pain and rash are near an eye, as shingles of the eye can lead to permanent eye damage. Your doctor can advise you on ways to manage the symptoms of shingles, including medicines for pain relief and antiviral medicines.