

Shingles

Shingles (herpes zoster) is a viral infection of the nerve roots. Herpes causes pain and usually a band of rash that spreads on one side of your body.

Shingles is caused by the same virus (herpes zoster) that causes chickenpox in children. Once you've had chickenpox, you cannot get chickenpox again, although the virus can become reactivated and reappear as shingles. No one knows what makes the virus active again. The herpes zoster virus is actually part of a larger family of viruses (herpes) that can cause several different infectious diseases, including chickenpox, shingles, genital herpes, and cold sores (or fever blisters).

The shingles (herpes zoster) rash can appear on any part of the body, but usually shows up as burning or itching blisters around one side of the chest, abdomen, or face. It's most serious if it involves the face or eyes, or spreads to both sides of the body. The blisters generally crust, scab over, and disappear after one or two weeks, but the pain can sometimes last after the rash has healed. The most common complication is postherpetic neuralgia—pain that continues even after shingles rash heals.

Someone who has never had chickenpox may catch chickenpox if they come in contact with someone who has blisters from shingles. As mentioned, healthy adults and children who have already had chickenpox are in no danger. If you are an adult and think you have never had chickenpox, however, you should call your health care professional to discuss the possibility of receiving the chickenpox vaccine. A person with shingles should avoid contact with infants, pregnant women, and people who have conditions which suppress their immune systems (such as people on cancer chemotherapy). Although shingles is not usually a serious illness, it may be of greater concern if it complicates other serious medical problems.

If you think you might have shingles, call your doctor or other health care professional within a day after the rash starts. This is especially important if your eyes or face are affected. Do not pop the blisters or they may become infected. Treatment of shingles usually includes taking acetaminophen or other pain relievers, and getting plenty of rest. Applying cold or warm compresses to the rash may also help. An over-the-counter product called Domeboro's Tablets is also recommended. Your doctor may also prescribe medications that will limit the pain and rash or an antiviral medication called acyclovir, which may help if taken in the first 24 to 48 hours after the start of the problem. Sometimes antiviral medications are combined with other medications, such as corticosteroids, for more effective treatment.



Use these Kaiser Permanente resources for reliable health information:

- ❖ Connect to our Web site at members.kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, message boards, health classes, and much more.
- ❖ Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- ❖ Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, or other resources.
- ❖ With a *Kaiser Permanente Healthphone Directory*, you can pick topics and messages to hear on Kaiser Permanente Healthphone (1-800-332-7563; TTY: 1-800-777-9059). Request a *Directory* from your Health Center or Department or download a copy at members.kp.org. (Search “Healthphone”.)

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