

What you should know about shingles

What is shingles?

Chickenpox and shingles are caused by the same virus: varicella zoster virus (VZV).

When you are first infected by this virus it presents as chickenpox.⁽¹⁾ Often this is a disease acquired in childhood, with 90% of children under the age of 12 worldwide having been infected.⁽²⁾ The virus remains dormant in your body once you have recovered from chickenpox and can reemerge as shingles (known as herpes zoster). Shingles is characterized by a painful rash typically found on the face or trunk of the body.⁽¹⁾

If I have had chickenpox will I get shingles?

No, while all individuals who have had chickenpox are at risk for shingles, vaccination against shingles provides a high level of protection.⁽³⁾

Approximately 1 in 3 adults will develop shingles at some point in their life, with the rate of infection slowly plateauing due to the introduction of a highly effective vaccine.⁽¹⁾

Why are older persons identified as being especially vulnerable to shingles?

As individuals age the waning of their immune system can prevent a robust immune-response to the dormant varicella zoster virus, making older persons and those with decreased immunity at increased risk for shingles.⁽³⁻⁵⁾

Are only older people at risk for shingles?

Anyone who has had chickenpox is at risk for shingles.

Each year in Canada there are:

- 130,000 new cases
- 17,000 reports of postherpetic neuralgia (neurogenic pain)
- 20 deaths⁽³⁾

The burden of shingles is predominantly experienced by those aged 50 years of age and older due a natural decline in immune function that occurs with age.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

Common symptoms of shingles include:

- Headache
- Photophobia (sensitivity to bright light)
- General feeling of unwellness
- Rash

These symptoms can lead to increased social isolation and poor mental health.

Symptoms typically last between 3 and 5 weeks.⁽⁶⁾

Are there long-term implications for shingles?

Complications of shingles can be life-changing and, at times, life-threatening. The most common complication is postherpetic neuralgia (PHN), which is a chronic and often severe pain in the areas of the skin where the shingles rash occurred. Approximately 10-18% of people with shingles will develop this debilitating symptom, which can lead to secondary consequences such as social isolation and poor mental health.

Other potential and serious shingles complications include central nervous system infection, pneumonia, secondary bacterial infections, and even vision and hearing loss.⁽¹⁾

I've already had shingles before, do I need to be vaccinated?

Most people will only have one episode of shingles however it is possible to experience multiple episodes of shingles over the course of your life.

The National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) recommends that all adults aged 50 years and above without contraindications should be vaccinated against shingles along with immunocompromised adults under the age of 50 per guidance from a medical professional. ⁽³⁾ This includes those who have had shingles (at least one year after their last outbreak) or who were vaccinated with the now discontinued live zoster vaccine. ⁽³⁾

How do I access a shingles vaccine?

In Canada each province and territory has different policies regarding how individuals can access shingles vaccination. Vaccination typically occurs in a pharmacy or family physician's office.

Speak to a health care provider for individualized guidance on how you can access a vaccine.

How much does the shingles vaccine cost?

Some provinces and territories offer older persons free immunization against shingles while others do not. Visit your regional health authority's website to learn more or speak to a health care provider to discuss your options for vaccination.

Note that many insurance plans also support the costs of immunization against shingles should you not be eligible for governmental support, with the average cost per dose of the shingles vaccine being \$160. ⁽⁷⁾

If someone I know has shingles are they contagious?

Yes. Those who were never vaccinated against or infected with chickenpox can develop chickenpox as a response to being exposed to shingles. The virus is spread through direct contact with the fluid that is contained in shingles blisters or the small particles in the air. ⁽¹⁾

How do I protect myself?

The most effective action to protect yourself against shingles is vaccination.

If you believe you may have shingles seek healthcare services to confirm diagnosis and access rapid treatment.

Where can I learn more about shingles?

The International Federation on Ageing has compiled resources to help you raise awareness of the risk of shingles amongst your network.

Visit www.vaccines4life.com to learn more about the risks shingles poses and how you can become a health advocate by promoting vaccination against shingles!