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Healthy Insights

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Shingles: What You Need to Know

It's estimated that one in three people in the United States will get shingles at some point. When you have chickenpox, a virus begins living in your nerve cells. In some people, that virus eventually causes shingles. As you get older, the risk for shingles goes up. Some studies also show that shingles can be triggered by stress. While there is no cure for shingles, it can be prevented and treated.

What to Look For

The first symptom of shingles is a burning or shooting pain. You might also feel a numb or itchy sensation on one side of the body. After about one to five days, a red rash may appear on one side of the body. The rash is usually around the face or waist. A few days following the appearance of the rash, you will notice fluid-filled blisters. Seven to 10 days later, the blisters dry up and crust over. Within a few weeks, the scabs begin to clear up. Throughout these stages, you may experience:

- Chills
- Fever
- Headache
- Upset stomach

If you think you may have shingles, don't wait to tell your doctor. Be sure to talk with your doctor about your symptoms no longer than three days after the rash starts.



Should You Get Vaccinated?

Adults aged 50 and older should talk to a healthcare professional about the shingles vaccine to reduce their risk of getting shingles. While people of any age can get shingles, it is more common in those who are over the age of 50. Talk to your healthcare provider about whether or not you should get the shingles vaccine. You shouldn't get the shingles vaccine if you've had an allergic reaction to it before or if you have shingles at the time of vaccination.



The shingles vaccine is given in two doses. You should get the second dose two to six months after the first one.

While shingles isn't generally contagious, it may be possible to pass it on to another person during the blister phase. That's why it is important to keep the rash covered.

When Does the Pain Stop?

Most shingles cases last three to five weeks, although each case is different. Usually, people will get shingles only once during their life, but it is possible to get it more than once. Some may experience symptoms for a few days. The intensity of the pain is different for each person. Some may just experience itching, while others feel pain at the slightest touch. Others may develop postherpetic neuralgia (PHN), which causes long-term pain that may result in depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, and weight loss.

What Next?

If you get shingles, remember to take good care of yourself both physically and mentally. Be sure to get plenty of rest and eat well-balanced meals. To soothe blisters, try an oatmeal bath or put calamine lotion on the affected area. Avoid stress by engaging in enjoyable and calming activities, like reading a book, listening to an audiobook, painting, or playing games like sudoku or word search. If you're feeling up to it, consider going for a brisk walk or gently stretching. Make sure to check with your doctor before lightly exercising while you have shingles.



Sources

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IPRO Healthy Insights comes from Dr. Clare Bradley, IPRO's Senior Vice President/Chief Medical Officer, a nationally recognized public health advocate.

IPRO is a non-profit organization that works with government agencies, providers and patients to measure and improve healthcare for all. For over 35 years we've made creative use of clinical expertise, emerging technology and data solutions to make the healthcare system work better.