

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Robert Brounstein

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Watching television these days, it is hard not to notice all the advertisements for the various drugs, medical treatments and legal teams that are focused on modern-day ailments. One of the more prevalent ads discusses the importance of getting a vaccination for shingles.

Shingles is a viral infection that causes a painful rash. Although shingles can occur anywhere on the body, it most often appears as a single stripe of blisters that wraps around the left or the right side of the torso. Sometimes the shingles rash occurs around one eye or on one side of the neck or face.

While not a life-threatening condition, shingles can be very painful. Shingles is caused by the varicella-zoster virus: the same virus that causes chickenpox. After you've had chickenpox, the virus lies inactive in nerve tissue near the spinal cord and brain. Years later, it may reactivate and travel along nerve pathways to the skin. It should be mentioned that having chickenpox in the past does not mean one will develop shingles – only that the potential to have shingles is present. That means 95% of adults in the US are at risk. And according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one third of the population will get shingles! The CDC estimates that 1 million people in the US will get shingles each year.

The reason for shingles is unclear. But experts agree that it may be due to lowered immunity to infections as you grow older. Evidence suggests this because shingles is more common in older adults and in people who have weakened immune systems. However, the prevalence of shingles may also be due to the fact that most adults in the United States had chickenpox when they were children - before the advent of the routine childhood vaccination that now protects against chickenpox. Therefore, older Americans may be susceptible to shingles, merely because they are the main group of people that have the varicella-zoster virus.

The causative virus, varicella-zoster, is part of a group of viruses called herpes viruses, which includes the viruses that cause cold sores and genital herpes. Because of this, shingles is also known as herpes zoster. But the virus that causes chickenpox and shingles is not the same virus responsible for cold sores or genital herpes, which is a sexually transmitted infection.

The signs and symptoms of shingles usually affect only a small section of one side of your body. These signs and symptoms may include:

- Pain, burning, numbness or tingling
- Sensitivity to touch
- A red rash that begins a few days after the pain
- Fluid-filled blisters that break open and crust over
- Itching

Some people also experience fever, headaches, sensitivity to light and fatigue.

Pain is usually the first symptom of shingles. For some, it can be intense. Depending on the location of the pain, it can sometimes be mistaken for a symptom of problems affecting the heart, lungs or kidneys. Some people experience shingles pain without ever developing the rash.

A person with shingles can pass the varicella-zoster virus to anyone who isn't immune to chickenpox. This usually occurs through direct contact with the open sores of the shingles rash. Once infected, the person will develop chickenpox, however, not shingles. Until shingles blisters scab over, infected persons are contagious



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and should avoid physical contact with anyone who hasn't yet had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine; especially people with weakened immune systems, pregnant women and newborns.

Factors that may increase your risk of developing shingles include:

- **Being older than 50.** Shingles is most common in people older than 50. The risk increases with age. Some experts estimate that half the people age 80 and older will have shingles.
- **Having certain diseases.** Diseases that weaken your immune system, such as HIV/AIDS and cancer, can increase your risk of shingles.
- **Undergoing cancer treatments.** Radiation or chemotherapy can lower your resistance to diseases and may trigger shingles.
- **Taking certain medications.** Drugs designed to prevent rejection of transplanted organs can increase your risk of shingles — as can prolonged use of steroids, such as prednisone.

In addition to the more notable effects of shingles, other side-effects or complications such as from shingles can include vision loss, neurological problems and skin infections.

The varicella vaccine (Varivax) has become a routine childhood immunization to prevent chickenpox. The vaccine is also recommended for adults who've never had chickenpox. While this vaccine is intended to reduce the chance of complications and thereby reduce the severity of the disease, it does not guarantee you won't get chickenpox (and therefore the subsequent illness of shingles).

Currently, there are two vaccines designed may help prevent shingles; Zostavax and Shingrix. Zostavax, which was approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2006, has been shown to offer protection against shingles for about five years. It's a live vaccine given as a single injection, usually in the upper arm. Zostavax isn't recommended until age 60.

Shingrix was approved by the FDA in 2017 and is the preferred alternative to Zostavax. Studies suggest Shingrix offers protection against shingles beyond five years. It's a nonliving vaccine made of a virus component, and is given in two doses, with two to six months between doses. It is approved and recommended for people age 50 and older, including those who've previously received Zostavax.

The most common side effects of either shingles vaccine are redness, pain, tenderness, swelling and itching at the injection site, and headaches. As with the chickenpox vaccine, the shingles vaccine doesn't guarantee you won't get shingles. Rather, this vaccine will likely reduce the course and severity of the disease and reduce your risk of postherpetic neuralgia (the condition of the characteristic burning pain associated with shingles).

While the shingles vaccine is used only as a prevention strategy, it is not intended to treat people who currently have the disease.

Should you suspect you are experiencing the effects of shingles, contact your doctor immediately, especially if the pain and rash occur near an eye or you or someone in your family has a weakened immune system (such as due to cancer, medications or chronic illness).

It is the set of the sails, not the direction of the wind that determines which way we will go

Jim Rohm - American entrepreneur and author

