

Patient information

Shingles

Infection Prevention and Control Department

What is Shingles?

The chickenpox virus (varicella zoster) causes shingles or herpes zoster. Anybody who has had chickenpox may go on to develop shingles.

The virus can enter the nervous system and lie hidden inside nerve cells for many years. Factors such as age, illness, medication, or stress can enable the virus to re-emerge and travel along nerve pathways to the skin producing shingles. It is more common in adults, usually affecting those over the age of 50.

Signs and Symptoms

- Sensations of pain, burning, tingling, or itching (lasting one to three days) in a localised area.
- A rash with blisters. These usually last two to three weeks before scabbing over in the painful area.

It most commonly occurs on the trunk of the body, often appearing as a band of blisters that wraps from the back to the chest or abdomen on one side of the body.

The rash and blisters can also occur:

- Around one eye.
- On the face or scalp.
- Inside the mouth.
- Down an arm or leg

Treatment

When caught early (within three days of developing the rash), shingles can be treated with oral antiviral drugs, such as Aciclovir. This antiviral drug may help to shorten the duration of the infection, and possibly reduce the risk of developing complications such as nerve pain.

If you are unable to take the antiviral treatment, the shingles will heal in time without treatment. If the pain is severe, your doctor will be able to prescribe you a painkiller, steroids or medicines which help with nerve pain.

Occasionally, the affected area may develop a bacterial infection, which may require antibiotics. It is for this reason, and to reduce the risk of spreading the chickenpox virus, that it is advisable to keep the area clean and dry and cover the blistered area with a non-adherent dressing to prevent infection getting in or out.

Is it contagious?

Shingles blisters carry the chickenpox virus, which is contagious to people who have never had chickenpox.

If you have shingles blisters, please avoid physical contact with the following people, as they may develop a more serious type of condition.

- Anyone who has never had chickenpox.
- Pregnant women.
- Babies less than one month old.
- People who are more likely to contract infections, for example people taking oral steroids, having chemotherapy, have had transplant surgery, or have renal (kidney) disease.

Once the blisters have scabbed over, your infectiousness is reduced, and if in hospital, you will no longer need to be nursed in a single room. You are advised to stay off work if the rash is still oozing and cannot be covered, or until the rash has dried out.

Complications

- Most people recover from shingles without problems, but in some people the rash can cause post-herpetic neuralgia where pain lasts for several months or even years after the rash has gone.
- The rash becoming infected, requiring antibiotics.
- Scarring or changes in skin colour after the rash has healed.
- Muscle weakness
- Eye problems which can lead to sight loss.

Vaccination

You can get shingles more than once, so it is important to get vaccinated even if you've had shingles before. A shingles vaccine is available on the NHS for:

- People who turn 65 on or after 1st September 2023.
- People aged 70-79 who have not yet been vaccinated.
- People aged 50 and over with a severely weakened immune system.

Further Information

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All Trust approved information is available on request in alternative formats, including other languages, easy read, large print, audio, Braille, moon and electronically.

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