

# Shingles: Immune System Failure

HOT  
VIP

0  
tweets

tweet

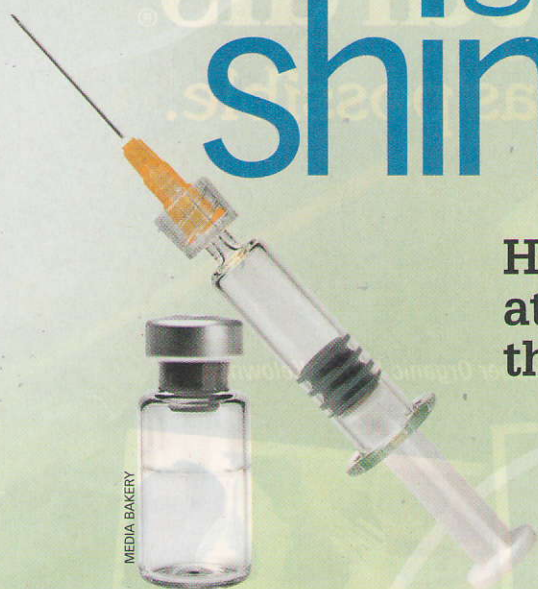


It's gone! Jeannie was so excited! Within a week, what had started out as painful **shingles** had just disappeared. She was pregnant, and since she was already having complications from the pregnancy she was really distraught over the possibility of adding the **pain** of shingles to her list of problems. She was obviously relieved when it went away so quickly.

**Shingles** is essentially the **chicken pox** that you had as a child. The **virus** hides in a **nerve** somewhere in your body, and when your **immune system** is down — for any reason — it can come out and make a rash. It's the same virus you had as a child that's been hiding inside you for decades!

You don't catch shingles from someone else — you had it all along. By the same token, you can't give it to someone else. You can, however, cause **chicken pox** in someone who has never been exposed to it before.

# Shaking shingles



MEDIA BAKERY

## How to avoid, or at least minimize, this painful virus

By Rita Colorito

YOU MAY HAVE noticed advertisements for the shingles vaccine, or know someone unlucky, probably an older relative or friend, who developed the virus. If you're wondering whether you should get vaccinated or if you're at risk, the simple answers are yes and yes.

Shingles, also known as herpes zoster, is a reactivation of the chicken pox virus in anyone who was previously infected with chicken pox. According to the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), each year about 130,000 Canadians are newly diagnosed with shingles and about 17,000 with post-herpetic neuralgia (nerve pain associated with shingles). The PHAC reports that in the pre-vaccine era, over 90 per cent of Canadian children were infected by the chicken pox virus by the age of 12. Shingles can hit at any age, but statistics indicate that half of the cases occur in men and women age 60 and older.

"It takes up latency in the nervous system and your normal immunity will hold it in check. As we get older, or in certain people who are immuno-suppressed, by illness or medication, that virus is just ready to jump back out and cause the second illness," explains Dr. Anne Louise Oaklander, associate professor of neurology at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston and a pre-eminent expert on shingles.

### Conditions

The most obvious sign of shingles: a painful or burning rash that begins on the back or torso on one side of the body (see

"Signs & symptoms," below). Less often, the rash begins on the face or head, and in mild cases a rash might not appear at all. If you experience a band of inexplicable pain, itching or unusual sensation, Oaklander suggests contacting your doctor immediately.

Shingles itself can't be transmitted from person to person. However, in rare cases, shingles can cause chicken pox in young people who haven't had chicken pox or been immunized for that disease.

### Complications

The shingles vaccine, authorized by the National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) in August 2008, reduces the likelihood of getting shingles by 50 to 70 per cent. It also reduces the severity of shingles-related complications. Having shingles is bad enough, says Oaklander, but the complications are also dreadful.

Post-herpetic neuralgia, or PHN,

remains the most common complication of a shingles eruption, occurring in half or more of untreated people age 60 and older. Some folks also experience post-herpetic itch at the site of the rash. Though rare, shingles can lead to encephalitis, stroke, spinal cord damage, vision and/or hearing loss, and even death.

It can take up to a month to fully recover from shingles. Oral antiviral medications help shorten the length and severity of the illness, and are most effective when started as soon as shingles is suspected—pain or itching often precedes the rash. Those who develop PHN may never shake the devastating, and often life-changing, symptoms.

"The pain persists in the area that was affected by the shingles," explains Oaklander. "In some people it can go on for years."

Treatment for PHN includes various topical analgesics, as well as anti-seizure and opioid medication. Tricyclic antidepressants have been shown to relieve pain and shorten the duration of the chronic condition by half for many people.

### Conclusions

Experts don't know why some folks get shingles and others don't, but the chances of getting shingles, and developing PHN, increase with age. The NACI recommends the shingles vaccine for healthy individuals over the age of 60, regardless of their previous exposure to chicken pox. The evidence suggests that the vaccine works best between the ages of 60 to 69, but it may also be given to persons 50 to 59 years of age.

"It's a simple and safe way for preventing a potentially devastating neurological illness," says Oaklander.

For more information on shingles, visit [www.WebMD.com](http://www.WebMD.com) and search "shingles." □

Rita Colorito ([www.ritacolorito.com](http://www.ritacolorito.com)) writes frequently on health, wellness and safety issues.

### The Costco Connection

The shingles vaccine is available at most Costco pharmacies. Vaccines vary per location; inquire at your local warehouse pharmacy.

## Signs & symptoms

### Rash on back of the body

According to the PHAC, shingles usually starts as a painful rash on one side of the face or body. The rash forms blisters that typically scab over in seven to 10 days and clears up within two to four weeks.

Before the rash devel-

ops, there is often pain, itching or tingling in the area where the rash will develop. This may happen anywhere from one to five days before the rash appears.

### Rash on front of the body

Most commonly, the rash occurs in a single

stripe around either the left or the right side of the body. In other cases, the rash occurs on one side of the face. In rare cases (usually among people with weakened immune systems), the rash may be more widespread and look similar to a chicken pox rash. Shingles can affect the eyes and cause loss of vision.

### Other symptoms of shingles can include:

- Fever
- Upset stomach
- Chills
- Headache—RC