

Emergency Services

## Shingles (Herpes Zoster)

Shingles, also known as herpes zoster, is a caused by the same virus that causes chicken pox. To get shingles, you must have had chicken pox sometime in your life. The virus hides in your body for years after you have chicken pox. Later in life, usually after 50 years of age, the virus can return as shingles.

### What to watch for

Shingles starts as a red rash that turns into blisters. The rash is often only on one side of the body and is shaped like a band or belt. Within 7 to 10 days, the rash will scab over.

You might also notice:

- burning, sharp pain (usually starts 2 to 3 days before the rash appears)
- tingling, numbness in or under the skin
- itchiness
- chills and a fever over 38.5°C (101.3°F)
- a headache
- bright light bothers your eyes
- an upset stomach

**Note:** Like chicken pox, shingles is contagious until the blisters have crusted or scabbed over. Contagious means a person who has never had chicken pox can get chicken pox from someone with shingles.

### How is shingles spread?

You can spread the virus by:

- touching the fluid from the blisters
- touching any material or equipment that has touched the fluid from the blisters

### How is it treated?

Shingles is treated easily at home (see the instructions on the next page). The doctor might give you a prescription for an antiviral medication. This medication is most effective when taken within 72 hours of the rash appearing.

### When to get help

See your family doctor or go to a walk-in clinic if you notice any of the following:

- Your blisters have yellow, milky drainage (pus).
- Your pain gets worse or does not get better with pain medicine.
- You get blisters close to your eyes.
- You get pain in your eyes.
- You get a stiff neck.
- You get hearing loss.

### How to care for yourself at home

- Take care of the skin sores.
  - Gently wash the area and dry completely.
  - Do not scratch or pick at the blisters.
  - Wear loose fitting clothing.
- If you are bothered by the pain:
  - Take pain medicine such as acetaminophen (Tylenol or store brand) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, or store brand).
  - Place cool, moist washcloths to the sore spots.
- To help with the itching and rash, soak in a tub with cornstarch or oatmeal.
  - If using cornstarch, pour ½ of cornstarch into lukewarm water while it is running. Soak for up to 15 minutes.
  - If using oatmeal, you can either use oatmeal flakes or oatmeal bath products from your pharmacy.

If using oatmeal flakes, take ½ to ¾ cup of flakes. Either grind it into a powder or make a packet by placing it into a piece of thin cotton or muslin. Pour the powder or place the packet into the tub.

If using an oatmeal bath product, follow the instructions on the container.

Fill tub with lukewarm water. Soak for up to 15 minutes.

**Note** – Using hot water will only make your itchy skin itchier.

- Talk to your pharmacist about ointments to relieve itching and pain.

### Prevent the spread of the virus

Always wash your hands after touching the area.

Keep your rash covered.

Wash any material or equipment that comes in contact with the fluid from the blisters.

Until the blisters have dried and scabs have formed, try to stay away from:

- pregnant women who have never had the chicken pox or the vaccine
- newborn or premature babies
- anyone who has a weak immune system or an organ transplant

### Can shingles be serious?

About 1 in 10 people with shingles get nerve pain even after the rash goes away (called 'post herpetic neuralgia'). This pain can last for months or even years.

### To learn more, it's good to ask:

- Your family doctor
- Your pharmacist
- Fraser Health Virtual Care  
1-800-314-0999 or live chat online at [fraserhealth.ca/virtualcare](http://fraserhealth.ca/virtualcare)  
10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., daily
- HealthLinkBC - call 8-1-1 (7-1-1 for deaf and hard of hearing) or go online at [HealthLinkBC.ca](http://HealthLinkBC.ca)

Adapted from 'FG.360.S55 Shingles' (March 2012) with permission from Vancouver Coastal Health.