

Taking the Pain out of Shingles

I recently had the opportunity to speak to an individual that has suffered from shingles. Through this conversation I was able to gain insight on the severity and potential complications of this condition. While all visible signs of the infection had disappeared, this person was left with intense nerve pain, likely to remain for months or possibly years to come. It was at this point that I understood the importance of educating the public about shingles and how it can be prevented.

Characterized by a painful rash, shingles is a common viral infection affecting older adults and people with weakened immune systems. Although shingles can affect any area of the body, it often shows up as a cluster of blisters stretching from the middle of the back to the center of the chest. Shingles is caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox (varicella-zoster), so anyone that has had chickenpox in the past could be at risk of developing shingles. Upon recovering from chickenpox, the virus travels into your nerve tissue where it can remain hidden for many years. At some point the virus can reactivate and travel along the nerve fibers to the skin where it presents as shingles. It is not known what exactly happens in our body to cause this reactivation, but it may be due to a lowered level of immunity as we age. This may explain why shingles are more common in people over the age of 50. It is estimated that one-half of people that live to the age of 85 will have had shingles at some point in their lives.

The first sign of shingles is often pain, burning or numbness localized to one area of the body. A red rash with blisters will normally appear a few days after the onset of pain. Other symptoms may include itching, fever, chills, headaches and tiredness. It is important to know that an individual with shingles can pass the virus onto those who have not had chickenpox, through contact with open sores. Once infected this individual will develop chickenpox, not shingles.

Although a shingles infection will usually heal on its own within a few weeks, there is a risk that some people will develop more serious complications. It is possible that the shingles pain could continue even after the blisters have healed. This is a condition referred to as postherpetic neuralgia, which results from damaged nerve tissue. Approximately 50% of people over the age of 60 that develop shingles will experience this nerve-related complication. Other potential complications include hearing and/or balance problems, as well as bacterial skin infections.

The treatment of shingles typically consists of oral antiviral medications, which are best started within 72 hours of symptom onset. Because shingles can also cause severe pain some people may require strong analgesics or numbing agents delivered directly to the skin.

Although effective treatment options do exist for shingles, one of the best things people can do is prevent their occurrence in the first place. Newly approved and now available in Canada is the shingles vaccine (Zostavax®). This vaccine can help prevent shingles in adults aged 60 and older, who have had chickenpox in the past. Like many other vaccines, the shingles immunization does not guarantee you will not get shingles, but it may reduce the duration and severity of the infection as well as your risk for nerve damage. This vaccine is unique in the fact that it must be stored frozen, and must be given within 30 minutes of removal from the freezer. With some pharmacies able to meet these storage requirements and given our ability to become certified immunizers, some pharmacists may be able to administer this vaccine in their respective practices. The shingles vaccine is currently being provided by our certified immunization pharmacists at The Medicine Shoppe Pharmacy in the Fredericton Co-Op.

Even though shingles is a common viral infection, especially in our aging population, it is important to know that effective treatment and prevention strategies exist. If you have any questions, or would like more information be sure to contact your pharmacist or family physician. Remember your health is our number one priority!

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