



August 2011

# Information sheet

Community and Health Services Department



## Shingles

(Herpes Zoster, Acute Posterior Ganglionitis)

### What is Shingles?

Shingles (also known as zoster or herpes zoster) is a skin rash caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. This virus is called the Varicella zoster virus (VZV) and is in the herpes family of viruses. After someone has chickenpox, this virus remains inactive in the body's nerve tissue and is never fully cleared from the body. Most people who develop shingles have no history of exposure to other persons with chickenpox at the time of the appearance of lesions. It can occur in any season. Incidence is highest in people who are over age 55, individuals with weakened immune systems (e.g., HIV, cancer, high dose steroids) as well as those who are experiencing emotional stress. Someone with a weakened immune system is a greater risk for developing shingles on more than one occasion.

### Symptoms of Shingles

Often, the first sign is pain along the nerve where the shingles will develop. These symptoms are commonly followed by sensations of burning pain, itching, oversensitivity or tingling, pricking or numbness. In the next two to three days, a rash with fluid filled blisters will develop in a limited area on one side of the body, often in a stripe, and there may be a fever and a headache. Over the next five to 12 days (average seven days), the blisters crust over and begin to heal. Shingles may have additional symptoms, depending on the dermatome involved. Herpes zoster ophthalmicus involves the orbit of the eye and may include symptoms such as conjunctivitis, keratitis, uveitis, and optic nerve palsies that can sometimes cause chronic ocular inflammation, loss of vision, and debilitating pain. Some persons experience residual nerve pain for months or years.

Most people recover without difficulty, although they may experience scarring of the skin and pain. A person who experiences a longer recovery should be seen by their doctor.

### How Shingles spreads

People with shingles who are otherwise healthy spread the virus through the fluid in the blisters. The virus sheds until the blisters begin to crust over.

Exposure to shingles does not cause shingles. However, someone who has never had chickenpox could develop chickenpox if exposed to shingles.

A person must have already had chickenpox in their lifetime to develop shingles. A person who has had shingles should have immunity against any future exposure to this virus.

For further information, please call:  
**York Region Health Connection 1-800-361-5653**  
**TTY 1-866-252-9933 or visit [www.york.ca](http://www.york.ca)**

To avoid spreading the illness to others and to prevent further exposure, the infected person should:

- Cover blisters with a gauze dressing until they are crusted over
- Stay at home until all the blisters have crusted over if you have a weakened immune system. People with a weakened immune system may be able to spread the virus through their respiratory tract.
- Disinfect any exposed surfaces and properly dispose of discharge from nose and blisters

## Preventing Shingles

The two vaccines to help prevent shingles include the chickenpox (varicella) vaccine and the shingles (varicella-zoster) vaccine.

The varicella vaccine is given routinely in childhood to prevent chickenpox and is also recommended for adults who have never had chickenpox. The vaccine can either prevent chickenpox or reduce the severity of the disease or complications.

The varicella-zoster vaccine can help prevent shingles in adults age 60 and older who've had chickenpox. The vaccine can either prevent shingles, reduce the severity of the disease or decrease the risk of postherpetic neuralgia (nerve damage caused by herpes zoster).

## Treating Shingles

Treatment is aimed to limit the severity and duration of pain, shorten the duration of a shingles episode, and reduce complications. Shingles may be treated with pain and anti-viral medication.

The doctor may also provide Varicella Zoster Immune Globulin (VZIG) to susceptible high-risk individuals within 96 hours of exposure.

For further information, please call:  
**York Region Health Connection 1-800-361-5653**  
**TTY 1-866-252-9933 or visit [www.york.ca](http://www.york.ca)**

