

Shingles (Herpes Zoster)

Shingles is a disease that causes a blistering skin rash. It is produced by reactivation of the same herpes virus (varicella zoster) that causes chickenpox. Shingles is less common in children than in adults, and when it does occur in children it is usually mild. Shingles can be more serious in children whose immune systems aren't functioning normally.

What is shingles?

Shingles, also called *herpes zoster*, is a disease causing blisters on the skin in one particular part on the body. It is caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox, called varicella zoster virus. It is not the same as the virus causing the sexually transmitted disease genital herpes (that virus is called herpes simplex type 2).

After your child has chickenpox, the varicella zoster virus stays in his or her body for life. The virus lives in nerves. Shingles occurs when the virus becomes reactivated, causing a rash in the area served by that nerve. This is seen most commonly in adults and adolescents—it is much less common in healthy children under 10.

When it does occur, shingles in children is usually mild. However, it can be more frequent and severe in children with abnormal immune function or those infected with chickenpox before or shortly after birth.

What does it look like?

In healthy children, shingles is usually very mild:

- A blistering rash occurs in just one area of your child's body.
- The rash may be painful and itchy, and that area of the skin may be very sensitive. However, these symptoms occur less often in children than adults.
- New blisters may develop for a few days before the rash starts to fade. It usually clears up completely in a week or two.

Shingles can be more severe in children whose immune systems aren't functioning normally—for example, because of HIV infection or cancer treatment. These children may have a more painful rash, similar to that of adults. They may also develop more serious complications, which rarely or never occur in healthy children who have shingles.

What are some possible complications of shingles?

- In healthy children, serious complications are rare. There is a small risk that your child will have further outbreaks of shingles in the future.

- The rash may become infected with bacteria becoming crusty or oozing (impetigo).
- Adults with shingles sometimes develop a complication called postherpetic neuralgia, in which the skin remains overly sensitive to pain even after the rash has cleared up. However, this is rare in healthy children.
- If your child's immune system isn't functioning normally, he or she will be at higher risk of complications from shingles. The rash may become more frequent or widespread, or the virus may spread to other organs.

What puts your child at risk of shingles?

If your child's immune system isn't functioning normally, he or she will be at higher risk of shingles and of developing a more severe type of the disease.

Can shingles be prevented?

Varicella (chickenpox) vaccination is recommended for nearly all children. One dose is given after age 1 and again at age 4 to 6 years if your child hasn't already had chickenpox. (If your child has definitely had chickenpox, he or she doesn't need this vaccine.)

Having your child vaccinated against chickenpox will reduce his or her risk of shingles but will not eliminate it completely.

How is shingles treated?

- Your child may receive medications to help shingles clear up more quickly and to reduce the risk of complications. An antiviral drug such as acyclovir may be given for up to a week.
- However, because shingles is usually mild in children and the risk of complications is low, your doctor may decide that antiviral treatment is unnecessary.
- To avoid spreading the virus, keep blisters covered with bandages.
- Antiviral drugs will probably be prescribed if your child has severe shingles or is at high risk of complications.

When should I call your office?

Call our office if:

- Your child's skin rash hasn't cleared up in 1 week.
- Your child develops a red, crusty, or oozing rash.
- Your child's rash returns.

