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A Pox on Shingles

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Shingles is a nasty viral illness. Ask anyone who has had the misfortune to have it. The rash is terrible and the pain it causes can be unbearable, even after the rash has gone away. It's a condition that anyone would and should avoid, if given the chance.

Shingles is caused by the same virus that causes chicken pox. Actually, shingles is sort of a continuation of chicken pox. Most adults had chicken pox as children. Our first exposure to the virus causes a total body illness, characterized by fever and a widespread rash with fluid-filled blisters. This is garden variety chicken pox disease. Most everyone gets over the classic illness, but we never get rid of the virus. The virus takes a break and hides out in special nerve tissues called dorsal roots. Our immune system does a pretty good job of keeping the chicken pox virus in check, so not everyone who has had chicken pox will have problems with shingles later on. In some individuals, the immune system weakens due to medical interventions, age, or illness, and the virus will re-appear, but only along the distribution of the nerve root where it was hiding.

The first sign of the re-emergent virus is pain in the area served by a skin nerve. This pain can last for several days and be quite severe. The pain can occur anywhere but is always limited to just one side of the body because a single dorsal root only supplies nerves to either the right side or the left side, not both. After several days of pain, a rash appears in the area of the pain. Sometimes this is just a small red patch with a few fluid filled blisters. Other times, it is a very deep red rash extending from the middle of the back around the side to the middle of the chest or abdomen, with many blistering sores. The rash may involve any nerve, even the nerves supplying sensation to the face and eyes, but only one nerve is ever affected.

Shingles is not really contagious in the usual sense. Close contact can't cause shingles in another person. But fluid in the blisters of the shingles rash is teeming with virus particles. Direct contact with the rash could present a risk of acquiring chicken pox to individuals who have never had that infection. People with active shingles should avoid contact with small children and others who have immune system problems. Shingles rash always heals. It may take several weeks. But the nerve involved in the shingles episode is never quite the same. In some people, there is a persistent numbness, itching or altered sensation. In others, there is unrelenting pain of the type that not even strong narcotic medication helps. This condition is called neuralgia, meaning nerve pain. In many people, the neuralgia never goes away. Several medications are available to treat shingles and the post-rash nerve pain. They are far from being totally effective, however. It would be nice to prevent shingles before it ever occurs.

Two vaccines are now available to prevent shingles. One is called Zostavax, and it is approved by the FDA for use in adults 60 years of age and older. This is the age group most commonly affected by shingles. The vaccine reduces the risk of shingles by more than 50 percent and the risk for developing post-shingles neuralgia by two-thirds. It is fairly expensive, but is given only once. Research is currently being conducted regarding use of Zostavax in age groups under 60 years old. The other vaccine that probably prevents shingles is the vaccine for chicken pox, called Varivax. Shingles should not occur if a person is never infected by the virus in the first place. Varivax is recommended for children 12 – 15 months of age, and is required for day-care and school attendance in the State of Washington. A second dose is given at 4 – 6 years of age. The two dose series is 98 percent effective in reducing the incidence of chicken pox. Both Zostavax and Varivax vaccines are very safe. Ask your health care provider or public health department about them.

For more information, also check out the vaccine web page at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/default.htm>).