

Shingles

Shingles (sometimes known as herpes zoster) is a red rash that appears on one side of the body. The red rash often shows small blisters in a patch. It is viral, and is contagious when the rash is blistering. Once the rash has become crusty, it is not contagious any more.

Shingles is much more likely if you have had chickenpox as a child. This is the same virus, the varicella zoster virus, and its later reactivation is what causes shingles. After the chicken pox has resolved, the virus can still remain in the nerves, only to be re-activated when the body's immune system is very low. This is often why elderly people get shingles, as their immune systems are weaker.

Shingles usually takes 4-6 weeks to disappear, but in some cases can cause post-herpetic neuralgia (nerve pain where the rash was). The rash usually forms along a nerve path, known as a dermatome.

There is a vaccine available which can reduce the likelihood of getting shingles by 50% in the 50-80-year-old population. It also decreases the chance of getting post-herpetic neuralgia, and reduces the spread of the rash if the patient were to get shingles. The vaccine is effective for 3 years.

If you suspect shingles, you should see your doctor. They will likely prescribe medication. In the early stages (within 72 hours) there is specific shingles medication. After 72 hours, its usually just pain relief such as paracetamol, non-steroidal anti-inflammatories or opioids.

How Do I Know If I Have Shingles?

In the very early stages, you may start getting a headache or fever, with a feeling of tiredness. These symptoms are followed by burning, pins and needles, or a sharp nerve pain. Within a few days, a rash develops. The rash will spread quickly, and usually occurs around the torso. It can spread around the face, arms or eyes though. The rash will start to blister filled with a fluid. That may last for 7-10 days. The fatigue, aching or malaise will last during this time as well. Then crusts will form on the rash and the skin will fall off leaving healed skin underneath in most cases. Occasionally scarring can occur.

Is Shingles Associated With Back Pain?

Yes it can be. Shingles can cause pain across the back. If a rash develops, suspect shingles. The back pain can be severe, with sharp nerve pains too. However, this is not mechanical back pain, and unlikely to respond to manual therapy. The pain usually disappears when the shingles has gone, although in a small number of cases nerve pain can persist.