

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

## Shingles



### Burlington County Health Department

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### **What is shingles?**

Shingles is a viral infection (the varicella-zoster virus), the same virus that causes chickenpox. It occurs only in people who have had chickenpox in the past and the virus becomes active again. Typically it happens in the elderly, but occasionally it occurs in younger individuals. Why the virus becomes active again in some individuals and not in others is unknown.

### **How is shingles spread?**

A person must have already had chickenpox in the past to develop shingles. Shingles cannot be passed from one person to another. However, the virus that causes shingles can be spread from a person with active shingles to another person who has never had chickenpox. In such cases, the person exposed to the virus might develop chickenpox, but they would not develop shingles. The virus is spread through direct contact with fluid from the rash blisters. The virus is present at the site of the rash and is contagious for a week after the blisters form.

### **What are the symptoms of shingles?**

Shingles is a painful rash that develops on one side of the face or body. The rash forms blisters that typically scab over in 7 to 10 days and clears up within 2 to 4 weeks. Before the rash develops, people often have pain, itching, or tingling in the area where the rash will develop. This may happen anywhere from 1 to 5 days before the rash appears. Most commonly, the rash occurs in a single stripe around either the left or the right side of the body. In other cases, the rash occurs on one side of the face. In rare cases (usually among people with weakened immune systems), the rash may be more widespread and look similar to a chickenpox rash. Shingles can affect the eye and cause loss of vision. Other symptoms of shingles can include fever, headache, chills, and upset stomach.

### **Does past infection make a person immune?**

Most people who have shingles have only one episode with the disease in their lifetime. Those with impaired immune systems (such as people with AIDS, cancer or leukemia) may suffer repeated attacks.

## **What are the complications associated with shingles?**

Shingles is not usually dangerous to healthy individuals, although it can cause great discomfort during an attack. Anyone with shingles on the upper half of their face, no matter how mild, should seek medical care at once. There is some danger that the virus could cause damage to the eye resulting in blindness. Complications are rare but may include partial facial paralysis (usually temporary), ear damage or encephalitis (swelling of the brain).

## **What is the treatment for shingles?**

Several antiviral medicines are available to treat shingles. These medicines will help shorten the length and severity of the illness. But to be effective, they must be started as soon as possible after the rash appears. People who have or think they might have shingles should call their doctor as soon as possible to discuss treatment options.

## **Is there a vaccine for shingles?**

The only way to reduce the risk of developing shingles and the possible long-term complications is to get vaccinated. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that people aged 60 years and older get one dose of shingles vaccine.

## **What can be done prevent the spread of shingles?**

Chickenpox must be prevented in order to prevent shingles. A vaccine for chickenpox is available and it is hoped that immunized individuals will be less likely to develop shingles in later life.

## **Where can I get more information?**

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.cdc.gov/>
- The Burlington County Health Department at (609) 265-5548 or [www.co.burlington.nj.us/health](http://www.co.burlington.nj.us/health)
- The New Jersey Department of Health website at [www.nj.gov/health](http://www.nj.gov/health)