

Shingles Vaccine

Shingles is an infectious and painful rash that typically affects people 50 or older (although any age can be affected). One million cases of shingles occur each year in the United States. It is caused by Herpes Zoster virus- the same virus that causes chicken pox in children and young adults. This virus is different from Herpes Simplex viruses 1 and 2 that cause cold sores and genital herpes.

How is shingles caused?

Chicken pox virus is typically picked up during childhood. After recovery the virus remains dormant for many years in the spinal cord and some parts of brain. The virus gets reactivated as the person ages or once the immune system weakens following development of cancer, leukemia, lymphoma or HIV and after receiving large doses of steroids or anticancer drugs. Then the virus spreads along the affected nerve and shows on the skin as red blisters that scab after 3 to 5 days. Before the rash develops, there is often pain, itching and tingling in the area where the rash will develop. Other symptoms such as fever, headache, chills and upset stomach may precede the illness. One in 5 people (the older you are the higher the risk and the more severe it is likely to be) affected by the shingles develop a painful condition known as post-herpetic neuralgia which can last for weeks to months. Rarely the disease could lead to complications such as pneumonia, hearing problems, blindness and brain inflammation and death. Usually shingles affects a person only once; occasionally it could recur once or twice more.

How is it passed on?

A patient with active shingles could pass on the virus by direct contact to others who never had chicken pox; such people develop chicken pox and not shingles. The virus is not spread by sneezing, coughing or casual contact. The risk of transmission is highest during blister-phase (and not before or after) and rapidly declines after scab formation. Patients with shingles should keep the rash covered, avoid scratching it, wash their hands often and seek medical attention at once.

How is it treated?

Medications: Several medications such as acyclovir (Zovirax), valacyclovir (Valtrex) and famciclovir (Famvir) are effective in treating shingles. They should be started as soon as possible after the rash appears. Early treatment could shorten the duration and the severity of the illness. Pain medications are often used to treat any associated pain.

Shingles vaccine: Shingles vaccine is licensed by the FDA for one time administration to people 60 or older (regardless of history of chicken pox) to prevent shingles. There is no upper age-limit. The vaccine is not useful in treating shingles or post-herpetic neuralgia. It will not prevent other forms of herpes such as genital herpes.

Before licensing, it was tested in 20000 people aged 60 and older and it is considered safe. A live but weakened form of chicken pox virus is used in preparing the vaccine. The most common side effects from the vaccine include redness, soreness, swelling or itching at the injection site and headache. Occasionally chickenpox-like rash may develop around the site of injection. It should be kept covered. Risk of transmission of the virus to people who are not immune to chicken pox has never been reported but is closely watched.

After receiving the vaccine you can be around young children, pregnant women, cancer patients or people with weak immune system. The vaccine is effective in preventing shingles in 51% and post-herpetic neuralgia in 67% of people who are vaccinated. The vaccine has been shown to be effective for at least six years following vaccination. The vaccine can be given to people who have had shingles in the past no matter when. People who just had recovered from shingles also could get vaccinated after complete resolution of the rash. You should not take the vaccine if you are allergic to gelatin, neomycin or any other ingredient of the vaccine, have weak immune system because of leukemia, lymphoma or any other blood or bone cancer, have HIV with T-cell counts below 200, are receiving high dose steroids or cancer drugs and are a woman who is or might be pregnant.

About the author:

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