



Herpes Zoster (Shingles)

What causes shingles?

Shingles (herpes zoster) is a nerve infection caused by the chicken-pox virus. Shingles results from activation of chicken-pox virus that has remained in your body since you had chicken-pox perhaps many years ago. The virus activation is limited to a nerve root. That accounts for the pattern of the rash, which always stops at the body's midline. The nerve involvement explains the stinging, burning, or pain, common in shingles. Some patients have discomfort before the rash appears.

The rash of shingles begins as red patches that soon develop blisters. The blisters may remain small or can become large. They heal in two to four weeks and they may leave scars.

Many patients mistakenly believe that "nervousness" causes shingles. That notion is incorrect. Shingles is a viral infection of a nerve and has nothing to do with being "nervous".

Patients do not have to be isolated. Until the rash has healed, however, you should keep away from persons who have never had chicken pox. Small children or infants can catch chicken pox from someone with shingles. Persons whose resistance to infection is lowered by illness or certain medications, such as cortisone, can also catch shingles. Contact with healthy adults appears safe.

Treatment:

There is no antibiotic or other drug effective against the chicken-pox virus except for high doses of acyclovir. Often, this is indicated. In other cases, you can only be kept comfortable while nature does the healing. If you have burning or discomfort, take Tylenol or a similar mild painkiller.

If you have much pain, you can be given a prescription painkiller to take until the pain subsides. The pain is caused by neuritis - inflammation of a nerve. Certain neurological medications taken by mouth shorten this neuritis and is often prescribed for it in adults, but not in children. The blistering rash usually clears up in a few weeks. The discomfort may persist longer.

Don't open your blister. You should compress the blister or crusts for 10 minutes twice daily with a mixture of one-quarter (1/4) cup of white vinegar and two quarts of lukewarm water or Burrow's solution. Later, when the crusts and scabs are separating, your skin may become dry, tense, and cracked. If that happens, rub on a small amount of white petrolatum (plain Vaseline) three or four times a day.

This is the medical opinion of Savannah River Dermatology. For additional information, please contact us at 706-691-7079.