



## **INFECTION PREVENTION AND CONTROL**

### **Shingles Patient Information**

#### **What is shingles?**

Shingles is the name commonly used for herpes zoster, an infection that shows up as a painful skin rash with blisters, usually on part of one side of the body (left or right), often in a strip. Shingles is caused by the Varicella zoster virus (same virus that causes chickenpox).

#### **How do people get shingles?**

After someone has had chickenpox, the virus doesn't leave the body, even after a person has recovered. It will live "quietly" for years in the nerve cells. It may become active again later in life when a person's immune system is weakened because of another health problem. When active again, this is called shingles.

#### **How do shingles make people sick?**

People with shingles will often have pain, tingling or itching and a rash. The rash can happen anywhere on the body, but it is usually in one strip on the right or left side of the body. It follows the path of nerves. The rash is a group of small, fluid-filled blisters that dry, scab over, and heal (like chickenpox) in a few weeks. The blisters usually heal completely but some people may have scars. The pain can last for a month or more. Scratching the rash can also cause a skin infection if harmful bacteria get into the sores. Shingles on the face can enter the eyes, which is serious because it can cause scars and blindness. As you get older, the complications from shingles can increase.

#### **How do I find out if I have shingles?**

A doctor can diagnose shingles by looking at the rash. If there is doubt about the diagnosis, a sample of the fluid from one of the blisters can be sent off for testing.

#### **Who is at risk of getting shingles?**

Any person who has had chickenpox can get shingles. People who are older than 50 or have a weakened immune system are at higher risk. A

person who has cancer or takes medicines that weaken their immune system, has HIV, even if they are younger than 50 can get shingles.

### **How can I prevent shingles?**

The best protection from shingles is vaccination. People can still get shingles after receiving the Herpes zoster vaccine, but it is less likely. The vaccine is recommended for most individuals 50 years and older. Some people should not receive the vaccine. Your doctor can advise you if you should not be vaccinated.

### **How do you treat shingles?**

Shingles is often treated with antiviral medication. The medication will decrease the severity and length of the symptoms. This medication works best if taken in the first three days after the rash appears. Your Doctor might also prescribe additional medication for pain and swelling.

### **Is shingles contagious?**

You can only catch **chickenpox** from someone with shingles if you have not already had chickenpox before. Most adults and older children have already had chickenpox, and so are immune. You cannot get **shingles** from someone who has shingles.

The shingles rash is contagious until all the blisters have scabbed and are dry. Also, if the blisters are covered with a dressing, it is unlikely that the virus will pass on to others. This is because the virus is passed on by direct contact with the blisters. (If you have a job, you can return to work once the blisters have dried up or earlier if you keep the rash covered and feel well enough).

### **What does the Hospital do to prevent the spread of shingles?**

The Doctor or hospital staff will look at the shingles rash. Special precautions may be taken depending on whether you have a weakened immune system, how many blisters you have or where the blisters are located.

If you have questions about the information in this document, contact Queensway Carleton Hospital's Infection Prevention and Control at 613-721-2000, ext. 3777 or Ottawa Public Health:

<https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/diseases.aspx>