

Shingles

(and we're not talking about your roof)

Shingles is a painful viral infection that affects 30% of Americans every year. It is caused by Varicella Zoster virus, the same virus that causes chicken pox.

The outbreak occurs mostly in people 50 years of age and older. The virus can lie dormant in the nerve tissue of the body for many years, then becomes activated and causes shingles later in life.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, shingles is not passed from one person to another. However, the virus that causes shingles can spread from a person with active shingles to another person who has never had chicken pox. In such cases, the person exposed to the virus might develop chickenpox, not shingles.

"If you are diagnosed with shingles, you are contagious as long as you have blisters and ulcers. It is important to cover your rash and wash your hands frequently. It also is important to avoid people who have not received the chicken pox vaccine, pregnant women and anyone with a weak immune system," said Dr. Khalilah Babino, physician at Loyola University Health System and assistant professor in the Department of Family Medicine at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine.



A shingles outbreak can last several weeks. Before the rash appears, the following symptoms may occur:

- Fatigue
- Headache
- Tingling
- Itching
- Burning Pain

After a few days, a blistering rash in clusters appears. The shingles rash is always located along the involved nerve pattern called a dermatome, typically in a band on one side of the body. Most often, the rash is on the chest and/or back, but can occur on other body parts.

"If you develop shingles on your face, especially near your eye, you should seek immediate medical care as this type may result in loss of vision," Dr. Babino said. The blisters that form will pop in a few days and become open sores, which are contagious. Usually, these ulcers scab over within 7 to 10 days and the rash goes away within 4 weeks.

"Fortunately, there is antiviral medication to help slow the virus and speed recovery. The earlier the medication is started, the more effective it is against the virus. I recommend starting these medications within 72 hours of the onset of rash. Since shingles can be very painful, you might also need prescription pain medication," Dr. Babino said.

Most people with shingles do not suffer any complications. Still, there is a 10% chance of developing a painful condition called post-herpetic neuralgia after the rash has gone away. The pain can last from a few months to a year.

You can decrease your risk of developing shingles and its complications by getting the shingles vaccine. One dose of shingles vaccine is advised for adults age 60 years and older, but can be given between the ages of 50 and 59.

"People who have had shingles previously can still receive the vaccine. If you are above the age of 50 years old, you should talk to your health care provider about the shingles vaccine," Dr. Babino said.