

Herpes Zoster (Shingles)

Herpes Zoster or Shingles is a painful, blistering skin rash due to the varicella-zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox. Anyone who has had chicken pox can develop shingles. The virus remains dormant or inactive in certain nerve root cells of the body and only when it reactivates does the rash occur and cause problems.

It is not clear what prompts the virus to reactivate or “awaken” in healthy people. It is believed that a weakness in the immune system, illness, trauma and stress may all trigger an attack.

Symptoms – usually disappears 10-14 days after onset:

- The first symptom is usually tingling, burning or extreme sensitivity in one area of the skin. This is usually only present on one side of the body. The pain and burning may be severe and may be present for one to three days before the rash occurs. Red patches on the skin are usually followed by small blisters.
- The blisters break, forming small ulcers that begin to dry and form crusts. The crusts fall off in 2 to 3 weeks. Scarring is rare.
- The rash usually involves a narrow area from the spine around to the front of the belly area or chest.
- The rash may involve face, eyes, mouth, and ears.
- Pain, fever or headache

Treatment:

- Antiviral Medications- fight the virus. These drugs help reduce the pain and complications and also shorten the course of the disease.
- Anti-inflammatory medicines such Advil, may be used to reduce swelling and the risk of continued pain.
- Antihistamines to reduce itching (taken by mouth or applied to the skin)
- Cool wet compresses can be used to reduce pain. Soothing baths and lotions, such as oatmeal bath (Aveeno), or calamine lotion, may help to relieve itching and discomfort.

Prevention:

- No one can catch shingles from you. However, they can catch chickenpox if they haven't already had chickenpox or had the chickenpox vaccine. The varicella-zoster virus (which is the virus that causes chickenpox, shingles and HZO) lives in the blisters from shingles and HZO.
- Shingles is much less contagious than chicken pox and persons with shingles can only transmit the virus if their blisters are open.
- People with Shingles are encouraged to avoid infants, women who are pregnant, and others with a weakened immune system
- Good Hand washing

Web links for more information:

Web MD: <http://www.webmd.com/skin-problems-and-treatments/shingles/default.htm>

Mayo Clinic: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/shingles/basics/definition/con-20019574>

National Institute of Health: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/shingles.html>

If you are a registered Millersville University student and you have questions or you need to make an appointment, please call Millersville University Health Services at 871-5250.