

## Shingles: An Overview of a Painful Rash *Robert A. Swierupski, MD*

**H**erpes Zoster, or “Shingles,” is estimated to affect 32% of people. It is caused by the varicella zoster virus, which is the same virus that causes chickenpox. The virus attaches to the nerves and can lay quiet for decades. Later in life, the virus becomes active again and causes Shingles to appear. Anyone who had chickenpox could develop Shingles. It is more common in people over age 60 and those with a weakened immune system.

Shingles usually begins with an unusual sensation in an area of skin. It can occur anywhere on the body. Many people describe a burning, itching, sharp or stabbing quality. Then, a blister-like or raised, red rash will appear. Several days can pass between the initial onset of the skin sensation and the appearance of the rash. The blisters will crust over after 7-10 days and usually disappear within

3-4 weeks. Shingles can occur more than once in one’s lifetime.

The most common complication of Shingles is postherpetic neuralgia, which is chronic pain in the area of the rash. This occurs in 10-15% of people and is most common in those over age 60. Unfortunately, this lingering pain can be severe and can last for years after the initial rash. If the Shingles occurs around the eye, this could cause inflammation of the eye or vision loss. If it occurs around the ear, it can cause a weakness of the facial muscles.

Many diagnosed with Shingles are concerned that it is contagious. It is only possible to pass the virus to an individual who has never had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine. They would develop chickenpox **ONLY** if they touched the open blisters of the rash or if they inhaled the virus in the air (by being

very close to the rash). It is important to avoid individuals who have not had chickenpox during the period when the Shingles blisters are open.

Shingles is treated with a combination of an antiviral and pain-relieving medications. The antiviral medication is most effective when started within 72 hours after the rash appears.

There is a vaccine available to help prevent Shingles. It is not 100% effective in preventing Shingles but it can reduce the severity if it were to occur at some point after receiving the vaccine. It is recommended for anyone over age 60, except those with certain cancers, AIDS, and those who are receiving chemotherapy or high-dose steroids. If you have questions about Shingles or the vaccine, make a note to speak with your provider at your next office visit.

### Nutrition Counseling Available

**M**edical nutritional therapy and nutrition counseling is available at Thunderbird Internal Medicine’s suite G-2 location. Sessions can assist individuals with weight loss, diabetes, heart and digestive issues, food allergies as well as those wishing to enhance their overall wellness. To schedule with Registered Dietitian Aubrey Uhling, call 602-341-5248.



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