



Fact Sheet

## Shingles & Postherpetic Neuralgia Pain

### About

Many people get chicken pox when they are children or even when they get older. Chicken pox is caused by the varicella zoster virus, a herpes type of virus. After the chicken pox heals, the varicella zoster virus moves from the skin along the nerves and into an area called the dorsal root ganglia, a part of the nerves which lie next to the spinal cord. The virus stays there for many years in an inactive state.<sup>1</sup>

“The most common reason for lowered immunity in shingles patients is being elderly and experiencing a stressful event...”

The virus is usually inactive for decades. It can “wake up,” become active again and multiply when a person’s immune system becomes weakened. For most people who get shingles, the weakening of the immune system is not the result of a serious problem. It is true that shingles may be brought on by cancer, AIDS, or drugs that lower the immune system, but this happens in a very small group of

patients. The most common reason for lowered immunity in shingles patients is being elderly and experiencing a stressful event, such as an illness in the family or emotional distress.<sup>1</sup>

The reactivated virus begins to multiply within the dorsal root ganglia, which causes damage and swelling to this area of the nerve. This damage to the nerve causes the first pains of shingles. The virus then moves along the nerve to the skin, damaging the nerve and causing swelling as it goes. When the virus finally reaches the skin, it causes the shingles rash.<sup>1</sup>

Early signs of shingles include burning or shooting pain and tingling or itching, usually on one side of the body or face. The pain can be mild to severe. Blisters then form and last from one to 14 days. If shingles appears on your face, it may affect your vision or hearing. The pain of shingles may last for weeks, months or even years after the blisters have healed.<sup>2</sup> If the pain from shingles does not go away, it is called postherpetic neuralgia (PHN). Only a small number of people with shingles develop PHN.<sup>1</sup>

## Facts

According to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), almost 1 out of every 3 people in the United States will develop shingles, also known as zoster or herpes zoster. In the United States, there are an estimated 1 million cases of shingles each year.<sup>3</sup>

Age is an important factor in determining who gets shingles and PHN. The older you are, the greater chance you have of developing shingles. And, the older you are when you get shingles, the greater chance you have of developing PHN.<sup>1</sup>



50%

While shingles occurs in people of all ages, it is most common in 60- to 80-year-olds; 50% of all Americans will have had shingles by the time they are 80.<sup>4</sup>

Older people with a neuropathy (nerves of the body that are not working correctly, usually due to old age or diabetes) are more likely to develop PHN after shingles. One study found that most people who had a neuropathy before they got shingles did not know they had a

neuropathy -- they did not have any symptoms. Therefore, having a neuropathy, even if it is not causing symptoms, may increase the chances of getting PHN.<sup>1</sup>

Other studies have suggested that the more severe and painful the shingles rash is, the greater the chance of long-lasting PHN pain. Also, some studies have concluded that people who do not cope well with stress and pain may have worse PHN than others who cope better.<sup>1</sup>

The burning waves of pain, loss of sleep, and interference with even basic life activities caused by shingles pain can cause serious depression.<sup>4</sup>

An American Pain Foundation survey of people diagnosed with shingles demonstrated issues with health care professional communication and shingles. The internet survey found that while nearly 60% of respondents said their physician mentioned burning, aching, sharp or itching pain in relation to their shingles outbreak, only one-third reported being told by a healthcare professional (HCP) about the possibility of developing post-herpetic neuralgia. Of the survey respondents who first experienced after-shingles pain, almost half (42%) did not think that it was related to their shingles rash in any way.<sup>5</sup>

# Additional Resources

## **American Pain Foundation**

201 N. Charles Street, Suite 701  
Baltimore, MD 21201-4111  
Phone: (888) 615-PAIN (7246)  
E-mail: [info@painfoundation.org](mailto:info@painfoundation.org)  
[www.painfoundation.org](http://www.painfoundation.org)

## **Beth Israel Medical Center Department of Pain Medicine & Palliative Care**

First Avenue at 16th Street  
New York, NY 10003  
Phone: (877) 620-9999  
Fax: (212) 844-1503  
E-mail: [stoppain@chpnet.org](mailto:stoppain@chpnet.org)  
[www.stoppain.org/pain\\_medicine/content/chronicpain/shingles.asp](http://www.stoppain.org/pain_medicine/content/chronicpain/shingles.asp)

## **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**

1600 Clifton Road  
Atlanta, GA 30333  
Phone: (800) CDC-INFO; (800) 232-4636  
TTY: (888) 232-6348  
E-mail: [cdcinfo@cdc.gov](mailto:cdcinfo@cdc.gov)  
[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

## **National Shingles Foundation**

603 West 115th Street  
Ste 371  
New York, NY 10025  
Phone: (212) 222-3390  
Fax: (212) 222-8627  
[shingles@shinglesfoundation.org](mailto:shingles@shinglesfoundation.org)  
[www.vzvfoundation.org](http://www.vzvfoundation.org)

Resources verified July 2011.

# References

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4. National Institute of Health Senior Pages: Shingles. Updated January 3, 2011. <http://nihseniorhealth.gov/shingles/aboutshingles/01.html>. Accessed June 1, 2011.
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