

The Painful Truth about Herpes Zoster or Shingles

by Ruth Young Pharmacist

Herpes zoster, commonly known as shingles, is a viral disease characterized by a painful, blistering rash on one side of the body usually forming a stripe or a line. The word “zoster” comes from the Greek word meaning belt or girdle, which describes the shape and location of the rash. The Latin word “cingulus”, from which the word “shingles” comes, means girdle or zone.

Shingles occurs only in individuals who have been previously infected with the varicella zoster virus, the chickenpox virus. After the chickenpox blisters heal, the virus stays dormant in the nerve cells and then, for unknown reasons and generally in midlife or later, the virus becomes active again resulting in shingles a viral infection of the skin. The infection presents itself as a rash occurring on the skin as a band above a nerve on one side of the body. It is most commonly seen on the torso or lower back area although it can occur on the face and scalp.

Because almost every adult has had chickenpox, most people are at risk of developing shingles. In fact about 20-30% of people develop shingles at some point in their lifetime. Of note, is that the risk increases dramatically after age fifty. For people eighty-five years and older, one out of two will have had shingles. With the aging population we will see an increase in the incidence of shingles in the coming decades.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

The first symptoms include headache, fever, and a general unwell feeling. Later, burning pain, itching, prickling and or numbness of affected skin area occurs. A rash usually follows in 1-2 days but may take up to 3 weeks to appear. People have described their pain as burning or throbbing while others experience a stabbing sharp pain. Pain may arise when the affected area is touched or it may occur without any contact at all. The rash usually begins as red blisters which become pustular, fill with blood and then crust over in 7 to 10 days. The crusts eventually fall off and the skin heals, although there can be some scarring if the blistering was extensive. In most cases the pain subsides within a month, however in about a quarter of the cases, shingles can cause long-lasting nerve pain and other serious complications. Shingle and can become a debilitating disease.