

SHINGLES



Overview

This condition is a viral infection marked by painful blisters and a rash, often on one side of the body. Typically it is not life-threatening.

Causes

Shingles is caused by the varicella-zoster virus. This is the same virus that causes chickenpox. After a person has chickenpox, this virus lies dormant in the nervous system throughout the rest of a person's life. The virus can reactivate at any time, causing shingles. Anyone who has had chickenpox may later develop shingles.

Symptoms

Shingles most often affects older adults. It typically begins with pain, tingling or numbness of the skin in a part of the body. This is usually followed by an itchy red rash and blisters on one side of the body. Shingles most commonly affects the back, sides, and chest, but can also appear on the face or neck. Other symptoms can include headache, nausea, fever, chills, and abdominal pain.

Complications

Shingles can lead to development of a complication called postherpetic neuralgia, in which the skin around the outbreak remains painful and sensitive for a long period after the shingles has cleared up.

Treatment

Most cases of shingles will heal without treatment. However, antiviral drugs may be prescribed to aid in the healing process. Management of the pain that results from shingles is a large part of treatment. Anti-inflammatory medication may be prescribed, and corticosteroid creams or injections may be needed. A shingles vaccine is available for adults aged 50 years and older. And adults who have never had chickenpox may be immunized with the chickenpox vaccine that is routinely given to children. Neither vaccine will prevent all cases of shingles, but both can help decrease the severity of symptoms and lessen the risk of complications.