

Shingles: The Itch Not to Scratch

July 14 2021 10:41 AM





Without question, all the talk in the past year has been about COVID-19 and the importance of getting vaccinated against the virus, which may have overshadowed other important vaccines, including the shingles vaccine.

But shingles is a virus that deserves plenty of attention.

Shingles is caused by the varicella zoster virus (VZV), which is the same virus that causes chickenpox. Once a person recovers from chickenpox, the virus stays dormant in the body, but can appear later and turn into shingles.

Shingles usually pop up on one side of the face or body and in one small area. Typical symptoms include chills, fever, headache, sensitive skin and an extremely painful rash.

“They can burn, they can sting and then they evolve to become fluid-filled vesicles, we call them, and then breaks out into a rash that follows a line that is that nerve and that’s the shingles,” says Dr. William Hook, family practice physician, OSF HealthCare.

According to Dr. Hook, everyone who has had the chickenpox is at risk of getting shingles. But those who are at greater risk are older people and people who have trouble fighting infections.

Most cases of shingles last between three to five weeks. It starts with burning or tingling pain, followed by a rash. A few days later, the rash turns into blisters before drying up and crusting over about 10 days later.

“Generally, the older you are the higher risk you have of getting a shingles outbreak,” says Dr. Hook. “The recommendation is to get the vaccine for people over the age of 50.”

The shingles vaccine is given in two doses. Doctors recommend getting the second dose between two and six months after the first dose. Potential side effects include arm soreness, fever and headache for a couple of days.

“For those getting the vaccine between the ages of 50 and 69, it’s about 97 % effective,” says Dr. Hook. “In the age group 70 and older it’s about 90 % effective. They’ve been tracking folks 70 and older for the past four years and find it’s about 85 % effective at that point. Those are pretty good odds.”

For people who are on the fence about getting the vaccine, Dr. Hook offers some advice.

“Folks who get the shingles are pretty miserable,” he says. “The risks of the side effects are many 2-3 days of soreness, and some people don’t have any side effects at all. So 2 to 3 days of soreness versus sometimes months of misery, when you weigh one against the other I know what my choice is.”



Shingles is not contagious. However, you can catch chickenpox from someone with shingles so take great care if you've never had chickenpox or have not received the MMRV vaccine, which protects against measles, mumps, rubella and varicella (chickenpox). Treatment for shingles include antiviral medicines and pain medicine. Wet compresses, calamine lotion and oatmeal baths can help relieve itching.

"It is very painful; it's not a good time at all," says Dr. Hook. "That is preventable with the vaccine. Even if you've had shingles before we still recommend getting the vaccine because people can get a reoccurrence. If you're not sure about getting chicken pox as a child, you should get the vaccine."

Talk to your doctor about shingles and the importance of vaccination. For more information on shingles, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).