

Shingles (Herpes Zoster)

What is shingles and what causes it?

Shingles is a painful skin rash caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. Another name for shingles is **herpes** [HUR-pee-z] **zoster**.

If you have had chickenpox, the virus that caused it remains dormant (inactive) in your body. It can become active again years later and cause shingles. Doctors don't know exactly what makes the virus become active again, but it's more common in people who are:

- **Older than 60 years.** The risk increases as you age.
- **Under great stress or have an illness or injury.**
- **Have a weakened immune system.** You may have a weakened immune system if you have cancer, an HIV infection, or take medicines that suppress your immune system.

What are the symptoms?

Shingles usually follows this pattern:

- **A painful burning develops on one side of the body or face.** It often develops on a narrow area from the spine around to the front of the chest.
- **A rash and small blisters develop in the same area** (as shown at right). The blisters usually scab and heal over in 2 to 4 weeks. They rarely return.
- **Some people also develop a fever, headache, chills, or upset stomach.**



How is it diagnosed?

A healthcare provider can diagnose shingles by seeing your rash and asking about your medical history. They may also take a small skin sample to see if the skin is infected with the virus.

How is it treated?

Your healthcare provider may prescribe:

- **A medicine to fight the virus.** This medicine works best if you start it within 3 days of seeing the rash.
- **Pain medicine.** The pain of shingles can be serious and you may need prescription pain medicine. Or, your healthcare provider may recommend over-the-counter pain medicine, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil), or naproxen (Aleve).
- **A steroid medicine** to reduce swelling and pain.

How can I protect myself and others?

Shingles cannot be passed from one person to another. However, the fluid from the blisters can spread the virus and cause chickenpox in a person who has never had chickenpox.

- **Cover your blisters and don't touch or scratch them.** Wash your hands often.
- **Get vaccinated if you are age 50 or older.** The shingles vaccine—called **Shingrix**—is the only way to reduce the risk of getting shingles. Ask your healthcare provider for Intermountain's fact sheet, **Shingles Vaccine (Shingrix)**.



Are there long-term effects?

In a few people, the severe pain of the rash remains even after the rash goes away. This is called **post-herpetic** [her-PET-ik] **neuralgia** [noo-RAL-juh]. This usually goes away in a few weeks or months. Shingles can also lead to serious problems in the eye.

When should I call my doctor?

Call your doctor if:

- You get a rash that looks or feels like shingles.
- Your shingles pain is not managed well and does not go away after 3 to 4 weeks.

Questions for my doctor

Intermountain Healthcare complies with applicable federal civil rights laws and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, or sex. Se proveen servicios de interpretación gratis. Hable con un empleado para solicitarlo. 我們將根據您的需求提供免費的口譯服務。請找尋工作人員協助。