



What is herpes zoster?

Herpes zoster (pronounced her-pee-zos-ter) is a painful skin condition that is caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. Herpes zoster is also called shingles. Most people have chickenpox as children and get better, but the virus stays inactive in the spinal cord forever. If your antibodies to this virus get low, which happens decades after your chickenpox or varicella vaccination, the virus becomes active and causes herpes zoster. Herpes zoster is a painful skin rash that can be on any part of the body and usually occurs in people over age 50. It can be treated with medicine and most people get better. Some people still have pain after the rash goes away.

What are the symptoms of herpes zoster?

Herpes zoster first starts as a burning red rash that begins to blister over four to five days. Many people feel pain, tingling, or itching several days before the rash appears. The rash can occur anywhere, but most often it is found on the back and chest. The rash will always be on just one side of the body, in an area covered by one nerve. Other symptoms include:

- Chills
- Diarrhea
- Dizziness
- Fatigue
- Fever
- Headache
- Hearing loss
- Nausea
- Stomach pain
- Weakness



What tests are needed?

Your doctor will ask about your medical history and do an exam and will probably be able to look at the rash and tell if it is shingles. Blood tests and some of the blister fluid may be needed to make sure nothing else is causing your symptoms.

What treatment is needed?

Your doctor will give you an antiviral medicine to help the rash and pain go away. Antibiotic medicine will be needed if the rash is infected. A skin cream or lotion (calamine lotion) may be used to relieve the pain. A cool, moist compress may also help the pain. You may want to soak in a tub of water to which cornstarch or colloidal oatmeal is added. For severe pain, a pain killer shot may be needed.



Do

- Do follow your doctor's directions
- Do tell your doctor about any medical problems you have
- Do tell your doctor about the medicines you are taking including prescriptions and ones you buy over the counter
- Do tell your doctor if you are pregnant or breastfeeding
- Do keep the blisters clean; wash the blisters gently
- Do avoid cold drafts as this can make the pain worse
- Do avoid anyone who has never had chickenpox as they can catch the virus
- Do avoid contact with pregnant women, children, or people who have cancer
- Do call your doctor if you have pus coming from your rash
- Do call your doctor or go to the emergency room if you have fever, eye pain, a severe headache, or if the rash is on your face



Don't

- Don't stop taking your medicine or change your dosage because you feel better unless your doctor says you should do so
- Don't take any medicine unless given your doctor gives it to you
- Don't shave the area with the rash
- Don't cover the blisters with a bandage



Recovery time

The blisters usually go away in two to four weeks. Some people, especially over the age of 65, will get a continued pain in the area. This is called postherpetic neuralgia. Most people who have herpes zoster will never get it again.



What can be done to stop it from happening again?

- Avoid stress because it increases your risk for herpes zoster
- Eat healthily and get plenty of sleep/exercise to strengthen your immune system
- Practice safe sex (i.e., wear a condom). HIV infection, a disease that weakens the immune system, can cause herpes zoster



Further information on herpes zoster can be found from:

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