

What do I do if I think I have shingles?

If you think you or one of your family members has shingles, see your doctor as soon as possible for treatment.

If your doctor thinks you have shingles, they can test some of the fluid from the blisters to see if you have the virus.

How do you treat shingles?

If shingles is diagnosed early enough (within three days of the rash appearing), it can be treated with antiviral medicines. People with long-lasting nerve pain can take medicines that help relieve the pain.

How can I get more information while in hospital?

Nurses from the Infection Prevention and Control team visit each ward at least once each weekday. If you would like a nurse to visit you please ask your healthcare team to contact us.

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Shingles

A guide for patients and families of the
Townsville Hospital and Health Service



Queensland
Government

What is shingles?

Shingles (also called herpes zoster) is a disease caused by a reactivation of the chickenpox virus (varicella). The first time you catch the virus, you get chickenpox. The virus stays in your body and can reactivate later in life. When it reactivates, it is called shingles.

Shingles is a serious disease because it can cause severe nerve pain that may last for months. It can also lead to:

- serious eye problems, including blindness
- pneumonia
- hearing problems
- swelling of the brain
- death.

Who is at risk?

Anyone who has had chickenpox is at risk of getting shingles later in life. About one in three people who have not been immunised against chickenpox or shingles will get shingles in their lifetime.

Shingles usually affects older people. The older you are when you get shingles, the higher your risk of getting serious disease. People who have a weakened immune system are also at risk of getting more severe disease, even if they are young.

If you have not had chickenpox, you can be infected with chicken pox from someone who has shingles. This happens if you come in contact with the fluid from shingles blisters.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

Shingles symptoms include:

- a tingling, burning sensation in the area (where a painful blistering rash will appear)
- headache
- tiredness
- discomfort when looking at bright lights.

Symptoms can occur for several days before the rash appears. The rash can last about 10 to 15 days. It often makes a stripe or belt-like pattern on one side of the face or body. The rash forms small blisters, which fill with liquid and burst before the skin crusts over and heals.

Sometimes the pain is still there even after the rash goes away. If the pain lasts for more than three months, it is called 'post-herpetic neuralgia'. If you are worried please see your doctor.

How do you prevent shingles?

Vaccination is a safe and effective way to protect against shingles and can be given to those over 50 years of age. The shingles vaccine (Zostavax) should not be given to people with weakened immune systems. Zostavax is free for people over the age of 70, please discuss with your doctor.

Shingles is less contagious than chickenpox. The risk of spreading the disease is low if the rash is covered. When the rash has developed crusts, you can no longer spread the disease.

If you have shingles, you should:

- cover the rash (if possible)
- avoid touching or scratching the rash
- wash your hands often to prevent the virus from spreading.

Until the rash has developed crusts, avoid contact with:

- pregnant women who have never had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine
- premature or low birthweight babies
- children who have not had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine
- people with weakened immune systems.