

SHINGLES VACCINE

PROTECTION FROM A PAINFUL DISEASE

I am sure you have heard at one time or another about the extremely painful rash that comes with shingles - 1 million people in the United States suffer from this debilitating disease annually. The disease happens more frequently as people age, especially if over the age of 50, and can cause some very serious complications. The bad news is that it is almost always diagnosed too late to be effectively treated. The good news is, it can now be prevented.

Shingles begins as a vague burning, tingling pain on one side of the face or body that follows a striped pattern. It is caused by the Varicella Zoster Virus (VZV) that is living in the nerves of people who have had chicken pox.

Shingles cannot be transmitted between people. On rare occasion, a person with shingles can transmit chicken pox to someone who has never had the childhood illness.

Some people go see their physician when the pain begins and are investigated for vague symptoms including fever, chills and upset stomach. About a week or so later a blister-like rash begins to appear in the same striped pattern. Many people suffer tremendously with the pain that accompanies this rash; some even require hospitalization to manage this pain.

There are many complications associated with shingles such as bacterial infection on the rash itself, blindness, pneumonia, brain inflammation, chronic pain and even death. If the characteristic symptoms are recognized before the blisters form, antiviral medications can be used to shorten the amount of time and the severity of the suffering as a result of this disease. Unfortunately, few people are seen and diagnosed early enough to benefit from this treatment.

The key to reducing the suffering due to this disease is to prevent it. A shingles vaccine has been developed and was licensed in 2006. It has been shown in clinical trials to prevent shingles in 50% of people over age 60 who are treated. It can also help reduce the pain associated with shingles by about 60%.

There are some restrictions on who can receive the shingles vaccine. You may not be able to get this vaccine if you are allergic to any part of it, have a weakened immune system, are pregnant or have Tuberculosis. The potential risks associated with this vaccine are very rare and include severe allergic reaction, irritation/inflammation at the site of the injection and headache.

If you or a loved one are 60 years of age or older, ask your provider about the risk of shingles and whether you could benefit from this vaccine.



Darcie Sharapova, M.D.