

Why shingles affects mostly people who are middle age and older

February 28 2014, by Evie Polsley

Shingles is a painful viral infection that affects almost 1 million people worldwide and 30 percent of Americans every year. Known as herpes zoster, it's caused by the same virus that causes chicken pox, the varicella-zoster virus. The outbreak occurs mostly in people older than 50 because the virus can lie dormant in the nerve tissue for many years and then become activated, which leads to shingles.

"If you are diagnosed with shingles, you are contagious as long as you have blisters and ulcers. Since it can be spread from person to person, it is important to cover your rash and wash your hands frequently. It also is important to avoid people who have not received the chicken pox vaccine, pregnant women and anyone with a weak immune system," said Khalilah Babino, DO, immediate care physician at Loyola University Health System and assistant professor in the Department of Family Medicine at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine.

There are some conditions that put people at greater risk:

- Cancer
- Autoimmune disorders
- Chronic lung or kidney disease
- History of [chicken pox](#)

A shingles outbreak can last several weeks. Even before the rash appears the following symptoms may occur:

- Fatigue
- Headache
- Tingling
- Itching
- Burning pain

After a few days a blistering rash appears in clusters. The shingles rash is always located along the involved nerve pattern called a dermatome, typically in a band on one side of the body. If the rash crosses the midline of the body, it is not shingles. Most commonly the rash is on the chest and/or back. However, it can occur on other body parts.

"If you develop shingles on your face, especially near your eye, you should seek immediate medical care as this type may result in loss of vision," Babino said.

The blisters that form will pop in a few days and become open ulcers, which are contagious. These ulcers typically scab over within 7-10 days and the rash usually resolves within four weeks.

"Fortunately, there is antiviral medication to treat shingles. The medication does not kill the virus like antibiotics kill bacteria, but they help slow the virus and speed recovery. The earlier these medications are started, the more effective they are against the [virus](#). I recommend starting these medications within 72 hours of the onset of rash. Since shingles can be very painful, you might also need prescription pain medication," Babino said.

Most people with shingles do not suffer any complications. Still, there is a 10 percent chance of developing a painful condition after the rash has resolved known as postherpetic neuralgia. This condition can last from a few months to a year.

You can decrease your risk of developing shingles and its complications with the shingles vaccine known as Zostavax. This vaccine is available to people 50 years and older.

"People who have had shingles previously can still receive the vaccine. If you are above the age of 50 years old, you should talk to your health-care provider about the [shingles](#) vaccine," Babino said.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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