

Chicken pox virus may be linked to serious condition in the elderly

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A new study links the virus that causes chicken pox and shingles to a condition that inflames blood vessels on the temples and scalp in the elderly, called giant cell arteritis. The study is published in the February 18, 2015, online issue of *Neurology*. The condition can cause sudden blindness or stroke and can be life-threatening.

The [varicella zoster virus](#), of the herpes virus family, can cause [chicken pox](#) and may reactivate later in life in the form of shingles, a very painful rash.

"Our analysis, which is the largest to-date, provides compelling evidence that the virus also reactivates in people over 60 in another way, triggering [giant cell arteritis](#)," said study author Don Gilden, MD, Professor of Neurology at the University of Colorado School of Medicine in Denver and a Fellow of the American Academy of Neurology.

Giant cell arteritis causes swelling and tenderness of the arteries on the scalp and temples of people over the age of 50. Gilden noted that it is the most common type of inflammation of [blood vessels](#) in the elderly, affecting an estimated 29 out of 100,000 people. Symptoms include a new severe headache, scalp tenderness, jaw discomfort, blurred vision, fever, weight loss and tiredness. Importantly, the cause of this condition has been uncertain, prompting the present study.

For the study, researchers searched for evidence of the virus in 13

temporal artery biopsies of people who died and had no previous symptoms of giant cell arteritis and in 84 temporal artery biopsies of people with giant cell arteritis. All of the biopsies were from people over the age of 50.

The virus was found in 74 percent of the biopsies with giant cell arteritis and in only 8 percent of the normal skin biopsies.

"If the association can be replicated in other studies, clinical trials should focus on treating people with giant cell arteritis with a combination of the current steroid drugs used for the condition, plus anti-viral treatment for the [virus](#)," said Gilden, CBE, MD, PhD, DSc, the Burton Chair of Neurology at Glasgow University in Scotland, in a corresponding editorial.

Provided by American Academy of Neurology

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