

Shingles: What You Need to Know About This Painful Nerve Rash

Shingles is a painful rash caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox (varicella-zoster). If you've had chickenpox, the virus stays inactive in your nerves and can reactivate years later, most commonly in adults over 50 or people with weakened immunity.



WHY DOES SHINGLES HAPPEN?

After chickenpox, the virus remains dormant in nerve tissue. It can reactivate later in life and travel along a nerve to the skin, causing pain and a rash.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS



Early Symptoms (before the rash)

- Burning, tingling, or sharp nerve pain
- Sensitivity to touch
- Headache or mild fever
- Feeling unwell



Rash Stage

- Red rash in a stripe or band
- Fluid-filled blisters
- Often painful or itchy



Healing

- Blisters crust over in 7–10 days
- Rash usually clears within 2–4 weeks



HOW SHINGLES AND CHICKENPOX SPREAD

01 The Virus Stays Dormant

After you recover from chickenpox, the varicella-zoster virus remains inactive in your nerve cells near the spine. It can stay there for many years without causing symptoms.

02 Reactivation Causes Shingles

If the virus becomes active again, it travels along a nerve to the skin. This causes, nerve pain or tingling, a blistering rash, usually on one side of the body

03 How It Spreads

Shingles itself does not spread from person to person. However, the fluid in shingles blisters can pass the virus to someone who has never had chickenpox. If infected, they will develop chickenpox, not shingles.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

Postherpetic Neuralgia (PHN)

Ongoing nerve pain after the rash heals. More common in older adults.

Eye involvement

If the rash appears near the eye, seek urgent medical care.

Seek medical care as soon as possible
antiviral treatment works best within
72 hours of the rash appearing.

PREVENTION

Shingles Vaccination

Vaccination is available in Australia and significantly reduces the risk of developing shingles and long-term nerve pain.

Under the National Immunisation Program (NIP), shingles vaccination is funded for:

- Adults aged 65 years and over
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 50 years and over
- Eligible immunocompromised individuals aged 18 years and over

Speak with your GP if you are over 50 or have a weakened immune system

TREATMENT OPTIONS

There is no cure for shingles, but treatment can reduce severity and discomfort.

Antiviral medications can shorten the illness, reduce symptom severity or lower the risk of complications

Pain relief may include over-the-counter pain medicine, prescription nerve pain medication, cool compresses or soothing lotions

Shingles can strike unexpectedly, especially for older adults or those with a weakened immune system. With INS LifeGuard's 24/7 monitored personal alarms and nurse-on-call emergency response, help is always within reach, backed by 40+ years of experience.