Shingles

Varicella zoster is the virus that causes chicken pox. It also causes shingles. Shingles can only occur after someone has chickenpox. Once a person gets chicken pox, the virus stays in the body. Shingles happen when the virus becomes active again.

This virus is a type of herpes. It is not the same virus that causes genital herpes or cold sores.

Symptoms

An outbreak shows up in two stages:

Your chest, back or areas around the nose and eyes may itch or tingle, be numb or have severe pain.

About a week later, there may be a patch of raised dots on one side of the chest, face, belly, arms or legs. The rash follows the path of an inflamed nerve. The rash is very painful. The pain will go away as the rash goes away. Sometimes, it lasts for months or years.

Small blisters also form. Do not scratch the blisters. This can cause infections. Infections require treatment and may leave scars.

In about two weeks, the blisters break open and get crusty scabs. They no longer contain the virus. Shingles only lasts about a month.

If the virus infects the nerves of the face or eye, shingles can show up on the mouth, face, neck, scalp, ears or nose.

If you get a rash on the forehead or near the eyes, you should see an eye doctor right away. A herpes infection in the eye can cause many problems. The virus can make you blind if it infects the back part of the eye.

Causes

If you had chicken pox, you can get shingles later.

Shingles can happen whether a person's CD4 cell count is high or low. When CD4 cell counts drop below 50, there is a higher chance that other parts of the body will be infected, such as the eyes.

Risk Factors

The risk of shingles is higher in people:

- Have HIV
- Older than 50
- People with a CD4 cell count of less than 500

Shingles can occur in people with HIV shortly after they start strong HIV medicine (meds). These cases of shingles may be a sign of an improved immune system.

How to Know You Have Shingles

A doctor can tell if you have shingles by the way it looks, the symptoms and a blood test.

Treatment

Treatment for shingles tries to fight the virus and reduce pain.

Herpes treatments work to fight against the virus. It is best if they are started in the first 3 days after the pain starts. All of the meds must be taken from 7 days to a few weeks.

Pain from shingles can be treated in many ways:

- Skin treatments. This comes as a patch. Since it is put on top of the skin, it can have fewer side effects than pills.
- Pain killers. Some meds for depression, epilepsy or severe pain can help.

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- Nerve blockers. These are shots that are given into the nerves or the spine to block pain.

Prevention

There is a vaccine for shingles, but it is a live virus vaccine. More research is needed to know if it is safe for people with HIV.

There is no way to predict an outbreak of shingles.

You can catch shingles from other people. A person who has an outbreak should not get close to other people. Avoid contact with the rash or with any objects that may have touched the rash or blisters.

For more information
Contact your Registered Nurse Care Manager, or call PHP Nurse Advice Line at: (800) 797-1717.

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