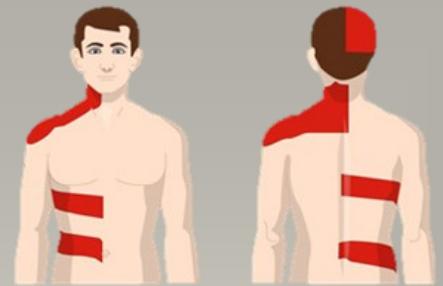


Shingles

The Disease called Shingles



Nearly everyone has heard of the disease called shingles. Shingles is an old time word that we have kept. Shingles would in more modern speak be called Varicella Zoster Dermatitis and Neuralgia. We'll stick with shingles.

Nearly every adult in the United States had chicken pox (varicella zoster virus) as a child. Fever, runny nose and a blistery, pustular itchy rash are the findings in childhood chicken pox. You got sick, you waited a while and you got better. Every once and a while a kid would die from complications like pneumonia or brain involvement but for most it was just a nuisance to get through. Unlike other illnesses (like strep throat) where you take medicine and the germs are all killed varicella virus continues to exist in your body. Think of it like an inmate with your immune system acting as the jailer to keep it locked up. As we get older so too does our "jailer". This is where shingles comes in. When the immune system falters the inmate escapes. Other reasons for a faltering immune system besides aging would be steroid use, alcoholism, poorly controlled diabetes or cancer and cancer treatment.

When the varicella virus escapes it causes illness but not as a recurrence of chicken pox. Typically a burning or tingling, unexplained pain will occur in a random body part. This is sometimes quite painful. It may go on for as much as 2 weeks before any rash occurs. It is commonly misinterpreted as a pulled muscle or kidney stone when in the flank until the rash reveals itself. The rash may resemble chicken pox blisters with crusting and redness. The more correct word for this blistering is vesicles. For most, the pain and vesicles will persist for a few weeks and then resolve. Many times the vesicles leave a scar. Several different medicines (anti-virals) are available to treat shingles and work best when begun at the first sign of vesicle formation. Sometimes prednisone is given for the anti-inflammatory effect and many times narcotic pain medicines are needed. There are several more serious things that can happen with shingles that would not happen with chicken pox. A vesicle on the tip of the nose is a warning of shingles distributed through the nerve that serves the eye. This is a blinding complication if not addressed quickly by a specialist. Another serious complication is an occurrence across the face near or at the ear. This, too, is a particularly painful form of shingles associated with the possibility of facial paralysis, hearing loss and vertigo. Thirdly, those who experience shingles are susceptible to staph infection. As you could guess a person already weakened so as to develop shingles in the first place may not do so well with difficult bacteria like staph. Additionally, an outbreak of either chicken pox or shingles is a way for another person to develop chicken pox is exposed. You would not get shingles from being exposed to an outbreak. Post herpetic neuralgia is the long name for a long illness. It is a miserable complication of nearly unending pain after the rash has disappeared. Very little helps with this pain once this neuralgia occurs. Before it occurs there is almost no way to predict who is at risk for it. For this reason more than to prevent the shingles were researchers so intent to develop a shingles vaccine.

For the last 20 years or so vaccine has been available to prevent chicken pox. It has decreased chicken pox hospitalization by 90 percent. In just the last few years there is also a vaccine for shingles. They are not the same vaccine and cannot be interchanged for immunization. At present the shingles vaccine is a one-time injection approved for those over 50 years old but only recommended for those over 60. Like any vaccine there could be complications but in millions of administrations there have been very, very few. Even if you have already had shingles the vaccine can still protect you at least in part from another shingles outbreak and the more dreadful post herpetic neuralgia.

The vaccines are both made with a live virus. This means that it is possible for someone to get a low grade chicken pox from varicella vaccine. The seriously ill and pregnant females should abstain from either vaccine except in the most extreme situations.

The doctors at XSTREME MD can direct you to references if you have a question about shingles or the complications.

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