

SHINGLES



Vaccine now available for disease related to chickenpox

by nancy nichols

When you think of shingles, your roof probably comes to mind — unless you're one of an estimated one million people each year who fall victim to a serious illness with the same name.

Shingles is a disease among adults that starts as a skin rash and can become much worse. It is caused by the varicella zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox in children.

After you've had chickenpox, your body retains the virus in a dormant, or inactive, form. If and when the varicella zoster virus in your body reactivates, most commonly after age 50, then shingles results.

A shingles rash begins with reddish bumps that become fluid-filled blisters. The rash usually appears on one side of the face or body and lasts from two to four weeks. Its main symptom is pain, which can be quite severe. Other symptoms of shingles can include fever, headache, chills and upset stomach.

"Shingles erupts around nerve roots and can be very painful, especially around the eyes," says Chandra Klein, R.N., who coordinates the immunization program at the Larimer County Department of Health and Environment.

In addition to being caused by the same virus, shingles and chickenpox have a fascinating relationship in terms of how the diseases can and cannot spread from person to person.

"An adult who has shingles can give an unvaccinated child the chickenpox," Klein says. "But an adult with shingles can't give shingles to another adult. And a child with chickenpox can't give shingles to an adult."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, almost half of the U.S. cases each year occur in people age 60 or older, and the risk of contracting the disease increases with age.

For about one in five people who get shingles, severe pain can continue even after the rash clears up. This pain is called postherpetic neuralgia and can lead to complications that make it difficult to sleep, wear clothes comfortably, tolerate even slight temperature changes or leave the house.

Fortunately there is antiviral medicine that can reduce the severity and duration of symptoms. And a new vaccine, called Zostavax, has been developed for shingles, which is recommended and available for people 60 years and older.

The Zostavax vaccine is a stronger version of the same varicella vaccine given to children to prevent chickenpox. It has been licensed by the Food and Drug Administration since 2006 and is available through your doctor, community pharmacies and the county health department.

Zostavax is about 50 percent effective at preventing adults from getting shingles, and it has been shown to prevent postherpetic neuralgia by nearly 70 percent.

Although its ability to prevent shingles may not sound all that impressive, its greater effectiveness at preventing postherpetic neuralgia is something that can dramatically improve the lives of many elderly. "That's what I emphasize when I'm talking to people about shingles — the vaccine's effectiveness at preventing the more serious condition," Klein says.

For more information about vaccinations for shingles and chickenpox, visit the CDC online at www.cdc.gov/vaccines. Excellent information is also available from the American Academy of Family Physicians at www.familydoctor.org and from the Mayo Clinic at www.mayoclinic.com.

People 60 and older are most susceptible to the debilitating effects of shingles. Getting vaccinated can mean a longer, happier life for many seniors.



Why do adults need vaccines?

Some adults incorrectly assume that the vaccines they received as children will protect them for the rest of their lives. Generally this is true, except that:

- Some adults were never vaccinated as children
- Newer vaccines were not available when some adults were children
- Immunity can begin to fade over time
- As we age, we become more susceptible to serious diseases caused by common infections (for example, flu and pneumococcus)

Annual vaccinations are recommended for all adults to help prevent seasonal influenza (the flu), and your healthcare team may recommend shots or periodic "boosters" to prevent such diseases as tetanus (lockjaw), measles, mumps, rubella, meningitis, hepatitis, pertussis (whooping cough) and shingles. In addition, international travelers may be required to get vaccinated against illnesses such as yellow fever.

The CDC's guide to adult vaccinations ("Recommended Adult Immunization Schedule") is available online at tinyurl.com/9zsa7x.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Bruce Cooper, M.D., Medical Director, Health District of Northern Larimer County