

# Shingles Fact Sheet

## What is shingles?

- Shingles, also known as herpes zoster, is caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox, the varicella zoster virus.<sup>1</sup>
- Shingles results from the reactivation of the varicella zoster virus acquired during the primary varicella infection (chickenpox).<sup>2</sup>
- There is no way to predict if and when the varicella zoster virus will reactivate or who will develop shingles.<sup>3</sup>
- Anyone who has had chickenpox is at risk of developing shingles and 95 per cent of Canadians have had chickenpox by age 15.<sup>4</sup>
- People can catch chickenpox from someone with shingles, but you cannot get shingles from someone with chickenpox.<sup>5</sup>
- A person cannot get shingles itself from someone else. Shingles can only develop from a reactivation of the varicella zoster virus in someone who has previously had chickenpox.<sup>6</sup>

## Initial signs and symptoms

- When people suffer from shingles, they may feel itching, tingling, burning or pain<sup>7</sup> in a defined section of their skin, typically on one side of the body or face.<sup>8</sup>
- Within a few days, a rash with fluid-filled blisters appears. These blisters may take from two to four weeks to heal.<sup>9</sup>
- Zoster does not seem to possess a seasonal pattern.<sup>10</sup> It can occur at any time without warning.<sup>11</sup>

## Shingles pain

- Pain is a major feature of shingles, especially in older persons. Pain accompanies the shingles rash in 60-90 per cent of immunocompetent individuals with shingles and occurs in 90 per cent of persons with shingles who are 60 years of age or older.<sup>12</sup>

- For most people, the pain associated with a shingles rash usually lessens as it heals. For some people, shingles can cause debilitating pain called post-herpetic neuralgia (PHN) that can last for months or even years.<sup>13</sup>
- PHN is the most common serious complication of shingles<sup>14</sup> and the most debilitating aspect of shingles.<sup>15</sup>
- PHN occurs when the virus that causes shingles damages certain nerves. The type of pain can vary and may be described as:<sup>16</sup>
  - Burning and throbbing
  - Stabbing and shooting
  - Constant or intermittent
- For more than 50 per cent of shingles sufferers over 60, shingles can progress into PHN.<sup>17</sup>
- About 40 per cent of patients with shingles who do not take an antiviral therapy (and about 20 per cent of those who do) will start to experience PHN around six months after diagnosis.<sup>18</sup>

### **Other complications**

- Shingles or PHN can have a significant impact on quality of life at all levels, such as:<sup>19</sup>
  - Difficulty performing activities of daily living
  - Fatigue
  - Disrupted sleep
  - Social withdrawal
  - Depression
- Shingles of the eye affects up to 25 per cent of all cases. Of those cases, 50-72 per cent suffer from recurrent ocular disease and vision loss.<sup>20</sup>
- Other potentially serious complications of shingles include skin infection, scarring and decrease of hearing.<sup>21</sup>

### **Incidence and importance**

- In Canada, it is estimated that nearly one out of three people will develop shingles in their lifetime.<sup>22</sup>

- The incidence and severity of shingles and its complications increase with age<sup>23</sup>, with more than two out of three shingles cases occurring in people over 50.<sup>24</sup>
- It is estimated that one out of two people who reach age 85 will have shingles during their lifetime.<sup>25</sup>
- Up to 10 per cent of shingles patients 65 and older are hospitalized<sup>26</sup> with an average length of stay of 20 days in this age group.<sup>27</sup>

**Sources:**

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<sup>14</sup> Product Monograph for Health Canada dated August 11, 2009. Page 10.

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