PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Herpes Zoster (Shingles)

This information explains herpes zoster (shingles), including how it's spread and treated.

What is herpes zoster?

Herpes zoster, also called shingles, is an infection caused by the varicella virus. This is the same virus that causes chickenpox. Herpes zoster only develops in people who have had chickenpox in the past. After your chickenpox are gone, the varicella virus stays in your body as an inactive virus. This means that you may not feel symptoms, but the virus is still in your body. When the varicella virus becomes active again, it causes herpes zoster.

What are the symptoms of herpes zoster?

People with herpes zoster get a rash that looks like chickenpox. It can cause itching, burning, and pain.

With localized herpes zoster, the rash often appears as a wide strip on one side of the body. With disseminated (more widespread) herpes zoster, the rash covers a wider area of the body.

How is herpes zoster spread?

Herpes zoster can be spread by touching an infected person's blisters. Disseminated herpes zoster can be spread through contact with droplets from the nose and throat of someone who is infected. The droplets carrying the virus are released into the air when the infected person coughs or sneezes. They can easily be inhaled (breathed in) and cause an infection.

If you have had chickenpox in the past, contact with a person who has herpes

zoster won't make your virus active. But, if you haven't had chickenpox in the past, you can get it if you have contact with a person who has herpes zoster.

Who is at risk for herpes zoster?

Herpes zoster most often happens in people who have serious illnesses or weakened immune systems.

What is the treatment for herpes zoster?

Herpes zoster can be treated with antiviral medicine, skin creams, and pain medicine, if needed.

What precautions are taken in the hospital if I have herpes zoster?

Isolation precautions are steps we take to stop infections from spreading from person to person. If you're diagnosed with or exposed to chickenpox while you're in the hospital:

- You will be placed in a private room.
- The door to your room must stay closed at all times.
- A sign will be posted on your door telling all staff to clean their hands. They can use soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer before going into and after leaving your room.
- Isolation precautions for localized and disseminated herpes zoster are different.
    - For localized herpes zoster, all staff must wear a yellow gown and gloves in your room. These are sound outside of your room and can be disposed of inside your room.
    - For disseminated herpes zoster, staff must wear a yellow gown, gloves, and a respirator mask while in your room.
        - You can't walk around in the unit while following these isolation precautions.

- If you have either type of herpes zoster, you will not be able to walk around your unit. Also, you can't go to these areas of the hospital:
  - Pantry on your unit
  - Pediatric recreation areas on M9
  - Cafeteria
  - Main lobby
  - Any other public area of the hospital
- If you leave your room for tests, you must wear a yellow gown and gloves. If you have disseminated herpes zoster, you also will have to wear a mask.

You can stop following these precautions when all your blisters are dried and crusted.

Is there any way to prevent herpes zoster?

There is a vaccine called Shingrix® that prevents herpes zoster. This vaccine is recommended for people 50 years of age and older. It is also recommended for adults with weakened immune systems who are over the age of 19. Talk to your healthcare provider for more information about this vaccine.

Where can I get more information about herpes zoster?

If you have any questions, talk with your doctor or nurse. You can also visit the these websites for more information:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
www.cdc.gov/shingles/hcp/clinical-overview.html

New York State Department of Health
www.health.ny.gov/diseases/communicable/shingles/fact_sheet.htm

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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