

WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY  
**STUDENT HEALTH CENTER**  
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## **SHINGLES**

(Herpes Zoster)

Shingles results from reactivation of the varicella-zoster (VZ) virus. This virus is related to but is NOT the same as the herpes virus. Initial infection with the VZ virus causes chickenpox. After the symptoms resolve, the virus travels up the peripheral nerves and lives in the nerve roots. The virus then reactivates, usually in association with stress or another illness, and causes a blistering rash. You cannot get shingles directly from exposure to someone else with chickenpox or shingles. However, if you have shingles or chickenpox you may give susceptible persons chickenpox, as the blisters of both shingles and chickenpox shed the VZ virus.

### **Symptoms**

The rash of shingles usually persists for 10-15 days. It is usually on the trunk but can involve any nerve distribution. Involvement of the nerve around the eye is sight-threatening and needs to be evaluated by an ophthalmologist (MD eye doctor). Patients may experience pain even after the rash resolves. This, however, is uncommon in young adults.

### **When to Contact a Physician**

You should contact a physician if you feel frightened or worried about your illness. You should see a physician immediately if you develop lesions around the eye, a severe cough, extreme sleepiness, severe headache, shortness of breath, or if you have new blisters after 10 days. You should also notify a physician if you have an underlying chronic disease (cancer, kidney failure, etc.) or if you are taking steroids.

### **Treatment**

Burrow's solution soaks may help by decreasing discomfort and by preventing infection with bacteria. Antibiotics will not treat shingles but are occasionally necessary if a secondary bacterial infection develops. Antihistamines (Benadryl) taken orally or used topically may decrease itching.

### **Epidemiology**

Shingles blisters are highly contagious until they are completely scabbed over. They will not give another person shingles but they will give susceptible persons chickenpox. Therefore, you should avoid going to class or other public places until all lesions are scabbed over, if they occur on exposed areas. Any persons who have a chronic disease or who are on steroids and were exposed to you should be notified immediately.