

2017 September Health Notes by Evelyn Ames

Shingles and Vaccination

Had chicken pox as a child or as an adult? Chickenpox is caused by varicella-zoster, a herpes virus that is a common childhood illness and one that is highly contagious. If an adult develops chickenpox, the illness may be more severe. After a person has had chickenpox, the varicella-zoster virus can remain inactive in the body for many years. Herpes zoster (shingles) occurs when the virus becomes active again. The risk of shingles and post-herpetic neuralgia (PHN) increases as one gets older. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that people 60 years old and older get shingles vaccine to prevent shingles and PHN. People should get the vaccine whether they recall having had chickenpox. Studies show that more than 99% of Americans aged 40 and older have had chickenpox, even if they don't remember getting the disease. There is no maximum age for getting shingles vaccine but there is a recommended minimum age.

Who Should Get Shingles Vaccine? People 60 years of age or older. Protection from shingles vaccine lasts about 5 years. CDC does not have a recommendation for routine use of shingles vaccine in people 50 through 59 years old. Adults vaccinated before they are 60 years should discuss the risks and benefits with a healthcare provider. Even if one has had shingles, a shingles vaccine can help prevent future occurrences of the disease. There is no specific length of time a person must wait after having shingles before receiving the shingles vaccine, but generally it is best to make sure the shingles rash has disappeared before getting vaccinated. The decision on when to get vaccinated should be made with one's healthcare provider. The risks of developing shingles as one gets older are greater as well as complications are greater.

Who Should Not Get Shingles Vaccine? People who have ever had a life-threatening or severe allergic reaction to gelatin, the antibiotic neomycin, or any other component of shingles vaccine; those with a weakened immune system because of HIV/AIDS or another disease that affects the immune system, treatment with drugs that affect the immune system, such as steroids, cancer treatment such as radiation or chemotherapy, or cancer affecting the bone marrow or lymphatic system, such as leukemia or lymphoma; and women who are or might be pregnant.

The Shingles Vaccine Itself. Shingles vaccine has been used since 2006. Zostavax® is the only shingles vaccine currently approved for use in the United States. It reduces the risk of developing shingles by 51% and PHN by 67%. It is given in one dose as a shot and can be given in a doctor's office or pharmacy.

How to Pay for Shingles Vaccine? There are several ways shingles vaccine may be paid for:

- Medicare Part D plans cover the shingles vaccine, but there may be a cost depending on one's plan. There may be a copay, or one may need to pay in full then get reimbursed for a certain amount.
- Medicare Part B does **not** cover the shingles vaccine.
- Medicaid may or may not cover the vaccine. Contact insurer to find out.
- Private health insurance plans: most cover the vaccine for people 60 years or older.
- Vaccine assistance programs: some pharmaceutical companies provide vaccines to those who cannot afford them. Information is available at "patient assistance program" at companies that include Zostavax or check <https://vaccinefinder.org/>.

References:

<https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd/shingles/public/index.html>

<http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/shingles/expert-answers/shingles-vaccine/faq-20057859>

<http://health.mo.gov/living/healthcondiseases/communicable/chickenpox.php>