



## **Shingles**

### **What is Shingles?**

Shingles, also known as herpes zoster, is a painful skin rash caused by the varicella zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox. Following recovery from chickenpox the virus stays in the body. This virus can reappear causing shingles. The rash usually starts on one side of the face or body as blisters that scab after 3 - 5 days and usually clears within 2 to 4 weeks. Severe pain, burning and tingling are common and may result in permanent nerve damage. Approximately 15% of people who get shingles have pain, burning and tingling for at least several weeks and sometimes permanently. Other symptoms may include fever, headache, chills and nausea.

### **How is it Transmitted?**

Shingles cannot be passed from one person to another. Varicella zoster, the virus responsible for shingles, can be transmitted to contacts who are not immune to varicella through direct contact with vesicle fluid and indirectly through articles freshly soiled with discharge from vesicles. Shingles is not contagious before blisters appear or once the rash has crusted.

Shingles affecting more than one area of the body, called disseminated zoster, is spread by direct or indirect contact with vesicle fluid and also by inhalation. Surgical masks do not provide complete protection from disseminated zoster for a susceptible person.

### **Incubation Period**

2-3 weeks, most often 14-16 days.

### **Susceptibility**

Anyone who has recovered from chickenpox may develop shingles. Shingles occurs in 15 % of older adults and sometimes in children. Adults with cancer, individuals with immunodeficiency, and those on immunosuppressive therapy may have increased frequency of severe shingles.

### **Health Care Workers**

In most cases health care workers with shingles may continue to work as long as appropriate barriers are used. All lesions must be covered and hand hygiene performed before patient contact. Health care workers with shingles may not work with high-risk patients until the lesions are dried and crusted. High risk patients include those who are not immune to chickenpox, children, newborns, obstetrical, transplant and oncology patients and those who are immunocompromised. Health care workers with disseminated shingles must be excluded from working anywhere in the hospital until lesions are dried and crusted.

## **Exposure to Shingles**

An exposure to shingles is considered significant if an individual who is not immune to varicella has direct contact with fluid from lesions or objects contaminated with these fluids. With disseminated shingles, direct or face-to-face contact with the infected individual is considered significant. When scabs are dried the exposure is no longer considered significant. Exclusion from the work area is required for health care workers who have been significantly exposed from 10 days after the first exposure to 21 days after the last exposure. If clinical chickenpox develops during that period, exclusion from work must extend until lesions have dried. Varicella vaccine may be effective in preventing or modifying severity of varicella if used within 72 hours of exposure. Once vaccinated illness may still occur therefore the exposed individual should remain off work from day 10 after the first exposure until day 21 after the last.

## **Who can I call for more information?**

Call the Health Info Line at 613-735-8666 or 1-800-267-1097, Ext 666.

**Renfrew County & District Health Unit**  
7 International Drive  
Pembroke, Ontario K8A 6W5  
735-8653, Ext. 547  
1-800-267-1097

May 30, 2007

---

**Visit our website at [www.rcdhu.com](http://www.rcdhu.com)**