

What You Need to Know About Shingles.

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You may have heard of shingles — a frequently painful disease that is marked by a blistering rash on one side of the body or face. But did you know that shingles is caused by the same virus that caused chickenpox? And that a person's risk for shingles increases with age?

It's true. Once a person has had chickenpox, the virus can live, but remain inactive in certain nerve roots within your body for many years; if the virus becomes active again, usually later in life, it can cause shingles. More than 90% of adults in the United States have had chickenpox, placing them at risk for shingles, and the frequency and severity of shingles increase with age. In fact, shingles can affect anyone who has had chickenpox at anytime, without warning; there is no way to tell who will get shingles or when it may occur.

It is also estimated that 1 million cases of shingles are diagnosed in the United States each year, up to half occurring in people age 60 and older. Yet, despite the prevalence of shingles among older adults in the United States, many are unaware of their risk for the disease.

According to a national survey of older adults in the United States who reported not having had shingles, 85% said they had heard of a medical condition called shingles; approximately three-quarters of the 1,064 survey respondents admitted that they knew only some (24%), a little (27%), or almost nothing/not sure (26%) about the disease. Only eight percent of the respondents said they knew a lot about shingles.

Additionally, many survey respondents reported not knowing the risk factors for shingles. Of the 905 survey respondents who reported having heard of shingles, half (53%) were not sure of the factors that make people more likely to develop shingles, and only a few respondents correctly identified having had chickenpox (14%) or age (three percent) as factors that place an individual at risk for shingles.

Shingles usually starts as an unusual or painful sensation on one side of the body or face, followed by a blistering rash. The rash usually lasts up to 30 days. Pain from shingles can be mild to severe and may occur just prior to the development of the rash, during the eruption of the rash and as postherpetic neuralgia — which is long-term nerve pain associated with shingles. Postherpetic

neuralgia has been described as tender, burning, throbbing, stabbing, shooting and/or sharp pain, and it can last for months or even years. Other complications such as scarring, allodynia (pain from an innocuous stimulus such as the touch of soft clothing or a light breeze), pneumonia, visual impairment and hearing loss can occur as a result of shingles. Treating shingles and postherpetic neuralgia can be difficult, often requiring a multifaceted approach.

Considering the facts and statistics above, it is prudent to educate older people about the risk factors and symptoms of shingles and to encourage them to seek immediate medical attention at the first signs of the disease. The need for such a program is underscored by the response from physicians who participated in the same survey previously cited; the majority of whom reported that there is a need to increase the level of education about shingles for older people.

"The first 'baby boomers' are turning 60, and the older people get, the greater their risk for shingles. We believe this is a topic older people should know more about.", said William Rowe, Executive Director at The American Pain Foundation (APF).

The Healthcare Committee at the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce has a simple message: Shingles is a vaccine *preventable* disease. If you are an older American and have had chickenpox, or if you are a person caring for aging parents talk to a doctor or healthcare professional about the risk for shingles.

Shingles information is available online; one resource being www.spotlightonshingles.com; a program sponsored by the American Pain Foundation.

For those who may not have a computer or who may not be comfortable with using a computer, you can call this toll-free number to order a free shingles disease information brochure: 1-877-RISK-4-SHINGLES; that's 1-877-747-5474.

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