Shingles (Herpes Zoster)

What is shingles?

Shingles is a painful red rash with blisters that break open and then scab over. It is caused by the herpes zoster virus. This is the same virus that causes chicken pox.

After you have had chicken pox, the virus stays in your body's nerve cells. It may remain dormant (not active) and you will not have any symptoms. But sometimes the virus becomes active again and causes new problems.

Herpes zoster can become active again as you get older, particularly over age 50. This can be due to your body's natural aging process. Or it can be due to anything that weakens your immune system. Here are some of those things:

- illness or disease (such as HIV or other diseases of the immune system)
- fatigue or exhaustion
- stress or anxiety
- poor nutrition
- chemotherapy or radiation therapy
- certain medicines that suppress your immune system, such as corticosteroids or cyclosporins

What are shingles symptoms?

Shingles starts with pain, itching and tingling of the skin. Redness and numbness leads to a rash. Blisters form, then they break open and scab over. The blisters and scabs can last a few weeks. The pain and tingling can last much longer, though it is rarely permanent.

A herpes zoster rash develops blisters that break open and form crusty scabs.

How does shingles affect the eye?

If the herpes zoster virus infects the nerves of the eye, it can cause problems. They can include:

- a rash on both your upper and lower eyelids
- redness, burning, and oozing on the inside of your eyelids and white part of your eye. This is known as "pink eye" or conjunctivitis.
- dry eye
- risk of bacterial eye infections
- blurry vision and being extra sensitive to bright light
- pain, swelling, and redness inside your eye (called **iritis**)
- swelling of the optic nerve behind your eye (called **optic neuritis**)
- a breakdown of the surface of the cornea (the clear, front window of your eye)

When shingles affects the eye, you are at risk for more severe problems. These include glaucoma, cataracts, double vision and scarring of the cornea.

How are eye symptoms from shingles treated?

Treatment will focus on relieving the rash, swelling and pain of shingles. It may include:

- placing cool, moist compresses over your closed eyes for relief
- taking certain medicines to help reduce redness, relieve pain, and treat the virus
- using eye drops to fight infection or moisten your eyes

If shingles has caused glaucoma, cataracts, double vision or eye scarring, other treatments are necessary. Your ophthalmologist will discuss surgery or other types of medicine if they are recommended.

A shingles vaccine is recommended for people 50 years and older. This vaccine lowers their risk of getting painful shingles. But the shingles vaccine does not treat active shingles or pain that has developed after the rash is gone. Talk with your doctor about this vaccine and if it is recommended for you.

Avoid spreading the shingles virus

Herpes zoster can be contagious (passed from person to person). But it can only be passed to others who have not had chicken pox. Someone newly infected with the herpes zoster virus will then develop chicken pox, not shingles.

If you have shingles, avoid being around people who may be more easily infected. This includes infants, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems.

Summary

Shingles is caused by the herpes zoster virus. It can cause eye problems with symptoms such as a rash on the eyelids, "pink eye", cornea problems, blurry vision, pain and swelling inside the eye.

Treatment is focused on relieving the rash, swelling and pain. Placing cool, moist compresses over your closed eyes can help. Medication can help reduce redness, relieve pain, and treat the virus.

If shingles has caused major eye problems like corneal scarring or high pressure in the eye, your ophthalmologist will talk with you about other treatment options.

If you have any questions about your eyes or your vision, speak with your ophthalmologist. He or she is committed to protecting your sight.

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