

Infection prevention and control

Shingles (Herpes Zoster)

What is shingles?

Shingles is caused by the chickenpox (varicella-zoster) virus. It is a painful fluid-filled rash on one side of the body. You may hear the doctor call it herpes zoster as this is its medical name.

Are some people more at risk of shingles than others?

People who have poor immune systems which can be due to old age, illness or cancer treatments may be more at risk of developing shingles.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

The first sign of shingles is usually pain in the area of the nerve where the virus has been living. A rash of fluid-filled blisters then appears in the affected area, usually only on one side of the body. The rash is usually present for about 7 days but the pain may last for longer. The pain is more common in elderly people and on average lasts for 3 to 6 months, although it can continue for years.

How did I get shingles?

If you had chicken pox as a child, the virus will have remained in the nervous tissue in your body. It does this without causing any symptoms. It is not known what causes the virus to re-appear.

If you need information in a different format, such as easy read, large print, BSL, braille, email, SMS text or other communication support, please tell your ward or clinic nurse.

The Christie is committed to producing high quality, evidence based information for patients. Our patient information adheres to the principles and quality statements of the Information Standard. If you would like to have details about the sources used please contact the-christie.patient.information@nhs.net

For information and advice visit the cancer information centres at Withington, Oldham or Salford. Opening times can vary, please check before making a special journey.

Contact The Christie Hotline for urgent support and specialist advice
The Christie Hotline: 0161 446 3658
Open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week



What will happen to me?

The rash of fluid-filled blisters is usually present for about 7 days, but the pain may persist for longer. You will continue to be infectious until all the spots have crusted over.

Can it affect my visitors?

Visitors cannot catch shingles from you. It is possible for people who have never had chickenpox to develop chickenpox as a result of contact with a person who has shingles. Therefore they should avoid visiting you until all the fluid-filled spots have crusted over.

How can I stop shingles spreading?

As shingles rashes are caused by the chickenpox virus, it is best to avoid contact with people who have not had chickenpox before. Try to avoid contact with:

- pregnant women who have not had chickenpox before
- people with a weakened immune system - for example someone who is having chemotherapy
- babies less than one month old - unless it is your own baby, as they should be protected from the virus by your immune system

Is shingles treatable?

Shingles is a viral infection that will not respond to antibiotics, but can be treated with anti-viral medicines. People who have poor immune systems due to old age, illness or cancer treatments may be given anti-viral medicines and immunoglobulin (a special preparation of antibodies taken from the plasma of blood donors), which may prevent them becoming very ill.

Shingles and the eyes

Shingles can sometimes affect your eye - known as ophthalmic shingles. Symptoms can include:

- a rash over your forehead, nose and around your eye

- conjunctivitis - inflammation of your eye that causes it to become red, watery and sticky
- problems with your vision.

Nursing care

Dependent on where you have shingles and how wet the rash is, you may need to be cared for in a side room and the staff may wear special personal protective equipment.

Where can I find more information?

If you would like any further information, please speak to a member of the team caring for you, who may also contact the infection prevention and control team for you.

You can also find more information on the NHS Choices website at: www.nhs.uk/conditions/shingles/

Infection prevention and control team

Tel: 0161 446 3731