Shingles

Shingles is a painful condition caused by the virus that also causes chickenpox (varicella-zoster virus, or VZV). It affects about 1 million individuals per year in the United States alone. Shingles, also known as herpes zoster, occurs in persons who have already had chickenpox. Most individuals who develop shingles are older than 50 years, have other medical problems (such as cancer), or are immune-suppressed from medications they take (such as steroid medications). The virus (VZV) causing shingles and chickenpox is a type of herpes virus. It is a different herpes virus from the ones responsible for cold sores or for genital herpes. VZV remains in nerve tissue after a person recovers from chickenpox. The virus remains dormant (inactive) until reactivated to cause shingles. The cause of this reactivation is not completely understood. The January 12, 2011, issue of JAMA includes an article about shingles. This Patient Page is based on one previously published in the July 1, 2009, issue of JAMA.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Rash on one side of the body or the face
- Blisters that develop in the rash site and then crust over
- Pain, often a tingling-type pain, can occur before the rash appears.
- Fever, headache, fatigue, and chills may occur.

TREATMENT

- Antiviral medications, if taken soon after symptoms begin, can shorten the length of time a shingles episode lasts. The severity of the episode may also be less if antiviral medications are taken.
- Supportive care, including rest and plenty of liquids, is useful in the treatment of shingles (like any other viral infection).
- Acetaminophen may help relieve pain and reduce fever, if it is present.
- Cover blisters until they are crusted over. Do not scratch blisters, since they can then become infected.
- Wash hands frequently.
- In rare cases, shingles can be severe and cause critical illness, including pneumonia or encephalitis (inflammation of the brain). Severe episodes of shingles may require hospitalization for more intensive treatment.

PREVENTION

Vaccines are available for chickenpox and for shingles. Varicella vaccine (for chickenpox) is recommended for children and for adults who have not already had chickenpox. Shingles vaccine is recommended for adults who are older than 60 years. Certain individuals should not have these vaccines: pregnant women, persons with immune system disease, and infants younger than 12 months.

Persons who have shingles can pass on VZV to others who have not had chickenpox. Once the blisters have healed, the contagious phase is finished.

POSTHERPETIC NEURALGIA

Some individuals develop a long-lasting pain condition called postherpetic neuralgia after having an episode of shingles. Postherpetic neuralgia is more common in older persons. Early treatment of shingles with an antiviral medication may help prevent postherpetic neuralgia.