



# Shingles

## What is shingles?

Shingles is a viral infection characterised by a painful rash on the skin. The infection is caused by the varicella zoster virus, the same virus that causes [chickenpox](#).

## How do you get shingles?

You can only get shingles after you have already had chickenpox. Shingles is not a new infection but rather a new outbreak of a previous chickenpox infection.

After you have had chickenpox, the varicella zoster virus stays in your nerve cells. The virus can be dormant (inactive) for many years.

If the virus becomes active again, it typically presents as shingles.

It is thought that in many people, shingles may be triggered by stressful events such as illness or grief.

It is rare to have more than one outbreak of shingles.

## Can you spread shingles?

It is not possible to catch shingles from someone experiencing a shingles outbreak.

If you have not previously had chickenpox and touch the fluid within blisters that appear in someone with shingles, (for example by hugging them) you could end up with chickenpox.

Unlike chickenpox, the virus is not airborne and cannot be spread by coughing and sneezing.

## Who is most at risk?

People over the age of 50 are most at risk.

It is rare for someone under 12 to get shingles, but it is a common health condition in older people, especially if you are over 80.

Shingles is also more common in people with a poor immune system resulting from other medical conditions.

## Signs and symptoms

Shingles is an infection of a nerve area, so the associated pain and rash will run along a band of skin supplied by the affected nerve.

The pain is due to infection of the nerve caused by the virus. This pain can range from tingling to very severe pain.

A rash will develop within 5 days from the start of the pain. The rash will look similar to a chickenpox rash, except a shingles rash is only found on one area of the body (it runs in a band along nerve supply).

The rash could form as a band around your rib cage, abdomen, face or forehead, or down an arm or a leg (although this is less common). Spots will appear and then turn into blisters, which will dry up to form a crust or scab over the top.

## Complications

- The pain caused by shingles can persist for many weeks or even months. This is called postherpetic neuralgia.
- Blisters can become further infected, which could be severe and lead to scarring.

If you have shingles on your face or forehead, the cornea of your eye can also be damaged.

## How do I know I have shingles?

If you have any of these symptoms, and have had chickenpox before, see your doctor for a diagnosis.



## Notifiable disease

Shingles is a notifiable disease. This means doctors, hospitals and laboratories must inform the Department of Health of your diagnosis to assist the Department in determining the frequency of this infection in the community. Notification is confidential.

## Treatment of shingles

Anti-viral medications, such as acyclovir, can help in the treatment of shingles if they are taken in the early stages of the infection.

The medication reduces the healing time of blisters, stops the new blisters developing and shortens the length of time a person might spend in pain.

Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about preparations you can apply to relieve pain.

## Is there a vaccine for shingles?

A new vaccine called Zostervax has been released in the market to protect people over 60 from shingles. It is available through your GP on prescription.

Chickenpox is a vaccine preventable disease. If you get vaccinated against chickenpox you can protect yourself against getting shingles.

The Measles, Mumps, Rubella, Varicella (MMRV) vaccine is a combination vaccine that helps protect children against 4 common illnesses - [measles](#), [mumps](#), [rubella](#) and [varicella](#) (chickenpox).

[Vaccination](#) is recommended for children from the age of 18 months.

Vaccinations are available under the [Immunise Australia Program](#) (external site).

## Where to get help

- See your doctor.
- Visit a GP after hours.
- Phone Healthdirect Australia on 1800 022 222.
- Phone the Immunise Australia Hotline on 1800 671 811.

## Remember

- Shingles is an infection of a nerve and the area of skin supplied by the nerve.
- You can only get shingles if you have had chickenpox.
- Older people and people with weakened immune systems are most at risk.
- Being vaccinated against chickenpox will help protect you from getting shingles.

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**Acknowledgements**

**Public Health**

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## See also

- [Chickenpox \(varicella\)](#)
- [About immunisation](#)

## Related sites

- [Healthdirect Australia \(external site\)](#)



Government of **Western Australia**  
Department of **Health**

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