

Kent County Health Department Shingles Fact Sheet



What is shingles?

Shingles is an infection caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. Once someone has had chickenpox, the virus does not leave the body. Instead, it hides along the pathways of the nerves of the skin. During a shingles outbreak, the virus reappears and causes the rash to occur.

Who gets shingles?

Anyone who has had chickenpox can get shingles. It occurs most often in older adults, but younger people with weak immune systems are also at risk.

How do you get shingles?

Contact with a person with shingles does not cause another person's dormant virus to reappear. However, the virus from a patient with shingles may cause chickenpox in someone who has not had chickenpox.

The virus is spread through direct contact with the fluid from the rash. It can also be spread by having contact with things such as clothing or towels which have touched the blisters.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

The first symptoms are:

- Tingling feeling on the skin
- Itchiness
- Stabbing pain

Fever, chills, tiredness, and nausea may occur three to four days before the rash. A red rash appears, most often on the chest and waist area, and spreads in a line-like pattern. It only involves one side of the body. Other common areas include face and lower back.

About one to two days later, the rash changes to fluid-filled blisters that dry and scab in about five days.

Often there is severe pain in the rash due to the inflammation of the nerves. The rash and pain usually go away within three to five weeks.

The Health Department does not diagnosis shingles.

How is shingles treated?

Most cases of shingles resolve on their own without special treatment. Antiviral drugs may be prescribed, especially for people with weak immune systems. Pain-relieving medications or anti-itching cream may also be ordered.

Are there complications from shingles?

Pain at the site of the rash may persist for months or years. There is also a risk of scarring. People with weak immune systems may have repeated cases of shingles. Anyone with shingles on the upper half of their face, no matter how mild, should see a doctor at once. There is some risk the virus could cause damage to the eyes, ears, or other problems with the brain.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for talking with a health care provider. If you have any questions about shingles or think you may have it, call your health care provider.