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Shingles

Recently, a dear friend of mine came down with a case of the shingles. It was a very traumatic and painful experience that landed her in the emergency room! This certainly wasn't the first time I heard someone re-count the painful details of this condition. I've also had family members go through this same disease several years ago. However, now there is help through a preventative vaccine.

Andrew B. Crocker, Extension Program Specialist – Gerontology Health, wrote the following article on shingles and gives more detailed information on the vaccine.

The same virus that causes chickenpox causes shingles, a disease that affects nerves and causes pain and blisters in adults. After recovering from chickenpox, the virus does not leave your body, rather it continues to live in some nerve cells. For reasons that are not totally understood, the virus can become active instead of remaining inactive and cause shingles. Most adults live with the virus in their body and never get shingles. But about one in five people who have had chickenpox will get shingles later in life – usually after the age of 50.

When the activated virus travels along the path of a nerve to the surface of the skin, a rash will appear. It usually shows up as a band on one side of the face or body. Right now there is no way of knowing who will get the disease. However, the risk of getting shingles increases as you age due to increased difficulty fighting off infections with age.

While symptoms may vary, most people report some or all of the following:

- Burning, tingling or numbness of the skin
- Feeling sick, such as chills, fever, upset stomach or headache
- Fluid-filled blisters
- Skin that is sensitive to touch
- Mild itching to strong pain

The rash usually happens on one side of the body. A few days after the tingling or burning feeling on the skin, a red rash will come out on your body, face or neck. In a few days, the rash will turn into fluid-filled blisters. The blisters dry up and crust over within several days. Most cases of shingles last from 3 to 5 weeks.

It is important to see your health provider no later than 3 days after the rash starts. He or she needs to see the rash to confirm what you have and make a treatment plan. Although there is no cure for shingles, early treatment with drugs that fight the virus may help. Medications are also available which may help lessen the pain. When started within 72 hours of getting the rash, anti-viral medications may help shorten the length of the infection and lower the risk of other problems.

After the rash goes away, some people may be left with long lasting pain called post-herpetic neuralgia or PHN. The pain is felt in the same area where the rash had been. Those who have had PHN say the pain is sharp, throbbing or stabbing. Their skin is so sensitive they cannot bear to wear even soft, light clothing. The older you are when you get shingles, the greater your chance of developing PHN. This pain can last for weeks, months or even years. Usually PHN will get better over time. Talk to your health provider if you think you might have developed PHN – there are medicines that may help.

In 2006, the Food and Drug Administration approved a shingles vaccine, Zostavax, for use in people 60 and older who have had chickenpox. Researchers found that giving older adults the vaccine reduced the expected number of shingles cases by half and, in people who still got the disease despite immunization, greatly reduced the severity and complications of shingles. The shingles vaccine is only a preventive therapy and is not a treatment for those who already have shingles. While the vaccine is currently approved only for those 60 and older, you may still wish to discuss this option with your health provider.

In some cases, blisters can become infected, resulting in scarring of the skin. Your health provider may prescribe an antibiotic treatment. Keep the area clean and try not to scratch. If blisters occur near or in the eye, lasting eye damage or blindness may result – see an eye doctor right away. Other problems may include hearing loss or a brief paralysis of the face. In a small number of cases, swelling of the brain may occur. It is very important to see your health provider as soon as possible – especially if you have blisters on your face.

Shingles is not contagious. You cannot catch shingles from someone who has it; but, you can catch chickenpox from someone with shingles. If you have never had chickenpox, try to stay away from anyone who has shingles.

If you have shingles, here are some things that may make you feel better:

Make sure you get enough rest, avoid stress as much as you can and eat well-balanced meals

Dip a washcloth in cool water and apply it to your blisters to ease the pain and help dry the blisters

Do things that take your mind off your pain: watch TV, read books, talk with friends or work on a hobby. Try to relax. Stress can make the pain worse. Listen to music that helps you relax.

For more information, contact the Texas AgriLife Extension Service office at 903/473-5000, ext. 157. You may also find information through the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke: <http://www.ninds.nih.gov/>.

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