

## **SHINGLES (HERPES ZOSTER) FACT SHEET**

### **What is Shingles?**

Shingles is the name commonly used for herpes zoster and is caused by the varicella zoster virus.

People get shingles when the virus that causes chickenpox, varicella zoster, is reactivated in their body. The varicella zoster virus does not leave the body, even after a person has recovered from chickenpox. It can flare up again causing shingles, often many years after a person has had chickenpox. The virus tends to reactivate when the immune system is weakened because of another health problem.

### **What are the signs and symptoms?**

People with shingles often experience pain, tingling or itching and then a painful rash. The rash can occur anywhere on the body, but is usually in one strip on the right or left side of the body. The rash consists of groups of small, fluid-filled blisters that dry, scab over, and heal (like chickenpox) in a few weeks.

### **How do I know if I have Shingles?**

A doctor can diagnose shingles by examining the rash and, if necessary, taking a sample of the fluid from one of the blisters.

Although any person who has had chickenpox can get shingles, most people who get shingles are older than 50 or have a weakened immune system. For example, a person might be susceptible if they have cancer, take medicines that weaken their immune system, or have HIV or AIDS, even if they are younger than 50.

### **Is there treatment or follow-up for Shingles?**

Shingles is often treated with antiviral medication to reduce the severity and duration of the symptoms. This medication works best if taken in the first three days after the rash appears. A doctor might also prescribe additional medication for pain.

- Use calamine lotion to help relieve itching.
- Put an ice pack or cool moist washcloth on itchy areas for 20 to 30 minutes.
- If the itching is severe or making it difficult to sleep, take a non-prescription antihistamine, such as Benadryl™.
- Wash your hands often to prevent infection.
- If your doctor has not already given you something, take a non-prescription pain reliever such as acetaminophen to relieve a headache, fever or general aches.

### **Can Shingles be prevented?**

The best protection from shingles is vaccination. The vaccine is recommended for people 60 and older and is free for those who are 65 - 70 years old.

People between 50 and 64 years of age can request the vaccine from their health care professional. It is not covered through OHIP. Speak to your health care professional to see if the vaccine is right for you.

Some people should not receive the vaccine; for example, those with certain allergies or who are taking certain medications. A health care professional can advise who should not be vaccinated due to contraindications to the vaccine.

**For further information, talk to your health care professional or call Peel Public Health at 905-799-7700.**