

## CHICKENPOX SHINGLES

Nearly every adult living in the United States today has had chickenpox, and if you have had chickenpox, you are at risk of developing shingles later in life. This is because the virus that causes chickenpox, the varicella virus (sometimes referred to as the varicella zoster virus), remains dormant in your nerve cells long after your chickenpox rash goes away. A normal, healthy immune system will usually keep the dormant virus at bay.

If, for various reasons, the varicella virus becomes reactivated, it can travel along your nerve fibers to your skin, triggering the eruption of the shingles rash.

### Other Shingles Risk Factors

The following things can increase your risk of developing shingles:

- **Older age.** Most people develop shingles when they're 50 or older. In fact, people who are older than 60 are 10 times more likely to develop shingles than children under 10 years of age. Your risk goes up as you get older because your immune system tends to become weaker as you age. When your immune system is weaker, the varicella virus that has remained in your nerve cells since you contracted chickenpox is more likely to reactivate and cause shingles.
- **Certain medical conditions.** If you have medical conditions such as cancer or HIV/AIDS that weaken the immune system, you are at increased risk of developing shingles.
- **Use of immunosuppressive medications.** People who take medications known to suppress the immune system, such as prednisone, are at increased risk of having shingles.
- **Being born to a mother who had chickenpox in late pregnancy.** Children whose mothers developed chicken pox 5 to 21 days before giving birth are at risk of developing shingles during childhood. These children may be born with chickenpox or develop it during the first few days of life when the immune system is not fully functional, and they could go on to develop shingles before the age of 5.
- **Lack of immunization.** People who have not had the chickenpox vaccine or the recently introduced shingles vaccine have a higher shingles risk than those who have been vaccinated.

### Reducing Your Shingles Risk

While you cannot eliminate chickenpox from your medical history, there is something you can do to reduce your shingles risk: Get vaccinated.

Why would the shingles vaccine protect against a dormant virus that you already have in your body? It really amounts to exposing your body to the virus once again, in the form of a tiny amount of weakened live chickenpox virus in the vaccine. This re-stimulates and strengthens your body's immune system against the chickenpox virus.

In 2006, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved a varicella virus vaccine (Zostavax) that is now recommended for people ages 60 and older who have had chickenpox. Researchers have found that getting the shingles vaccine can reduce your shingles risk by more than half.

It's now recommended that children be vaccinated against chickenpox between ages 12 to 15 months with a booster shot between 4 to 6 years of age. The chickenpox vaccine reduces children's risk of developing chickenpox, which reduces their shingles risk later in life. The vaccine given to children differs slightly from the shingles vaccine given to adults but contains the same weakened varicella zoster virus.

Last Updated: 02/01/2010