



# Shingles (*Herpes zoster*)

*An illness that requires airborne contact precautions*

This handout describes shingles (*Herpes zoster*) and its symptoms. It also explains how this disease can be spread and how to keep others from getting it.

To learn more about shingles, visit this Web site:

[www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/shingles/dis-faqs.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/shingles/dis-faqs.htm)

## What is shingles (*herpes zoster*)?

Shingles, or *Herpes zoster*, is caused by the chickenpox virus. Anyone who has had chickenpox or was vaccinated for chickenpox can get shingles.

The virus stays in certain nerve cells in a person's body after they have chickenpox and sometimes after they get the vaccine. It usually stays *dormant* (quiet). But, it can cause illness years later.

Shingles is more common after the age of 50, and the risk increases as people get older.

## What are the symptoms?

The first symptoms include numbness, itching, or severe pain, and then clusters of blisters appear. The blisters can be in a strip-like pattern on one side of the body (localized *Herpes zoster*) or they may appear in several areas (disseminated *Herpes zoster*). Sometimes there are no blisters, but the virus can cause pneumonia and other illnesses.

The pain can last for weeks, months, or years after the blisters heal. This lasting pain is called *post-herpetic neuralgia*.

## How is *Herpes zoster* or shingles spread?

If you have shingles, they came from the same virus that caused your chickenpox or from your vaccine. This virus has been dormant in your body since that time.

Although you cannot get shingles from someone else, people with shingles can spread the chickenpox virus to others. Someone who has not had chickenpox can get chickenpox if they have close contact with a person who has shingles. This is why we place patients with shingles in airborne and contact precautions.

People whose immune systems are weakened from illness or certain medicines can get disseminated *Herpes zoster*, a disease similar to chickenpox.

## Questions?

Call 206-598-6122

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC clinic staff is also available to help.

Healthcare  
Epidemiology and  
Infection Control:  
206-598-6122

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People with disseminated *Herpes zoster* should practice “respiratory hygiene.” They should wear a mask, wash their hands often, and dispose of used tissues in wastebaskets when coming into a health care facility.

Tissues, masks, and hand gel are available at hygiene stations placed throughout University of Washington Medical Center (UWMC) and at clinic front desks. “Cover Your Cough” kits are also available at the Information Desk on the 3rd floor, inside the main entrance.

### How is it diagnosed?

Shingles is diagnosed by its symptoms, by the appearance of the blisters, and by having specimens tested in the laboratory.

### How are others protected at the medical center?

At UWMC, we place “Airborne Contact Precautions” signs near the door of rooms of patients who have shingles. This alerts health care workers and visitors to use extra precautions around the patient to protect others who are at risk from getting the disease. Anyone at risk is advised not to enter the room.

### What happens when I am in contact and airborne precautions?

All health care workers and caregivers wear masks, eye protection, gowns, and gloves when caring for you, even if they are not at risk of getting chickenpox. In an emergency, health care workers who have not had chickenpox may put on an N-95 respirator or a Powered Air Purifying Respirator (PAPR) before entering your room.

Visitors should **not** enter your room if they have never had chickenpox or are not sure if they have had the chickenpox vaccine. Visitors who enter your room should wear protective items – gowns, gloves, and masks.

**Hand washing for 15 seconds, using alcohol hand gel, and keeping the area as clean as possible are stressed.**

You will be asked to stay in your room unless you need to go to other departments in the hospital for treatment. This is called being “in precautions.” If you leave your room, you will be asked to wash your hands and to wear a gown, gloves, and a mask.

Please do **not** use the nutrition rooms while you are in precautions. When you want a snack or water, ask a member of your health care team to bring it to you.

### When can the precautions be stopped?

Airborne and contact precautions may be stopped when all blisters are dry and have scabs.

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