

The real story behind shingles

Shingles is a fascinating medical entity and I wonder why, during two years of writing this medical column, it never occurred to me to write about shingles. So, sit back, relax and read on.

When you were just a young child (before the days of the chicken pox vaccine) and were laid up with those ugly, itchy, sometimes scarring blisters, little did you know that when you got to feeling better the virus, with the weird name of Herpes Varicella Zoster (HVZ), could rear its little head to wreak havoc on in your life.

Once someone recovers from chicken pox, the modus operandi of HVZ is to migrate to nerve endings and go dormant or inactive. Most of us are never bothered again and chicken pox becomes a distant memory. However, sometimes the virus "wakes up" and becomes active again. But now, the blistery lesions appear specifically along the nerve endings' distribution. Hence, the classic appearance of

shingles as a linear outbreak or cluster of blisters, usually from the middle of the back around the torso toward the front. Other appearances are also possible anywhere on the body, but still following the route of some nerve that services that location.

Why does the virus "wake up" again to cause the painful resurgence? The most commonly held theory has to do with the immune system. As you may or may not already know, your immune system is responsible for "fighting off" and quick recovery from infections. If the immune system is weak the virus takes advantage of the situation and reactivates.

What happens first is this overall feeling of being "flu-ish." You just don't feel right, like you were "coming down with something." Then the pain may start. The pain is in the area where the actual blisters are going to appear. It may be severe pain, or more like sensitivity on the surface of the skin. After a period of a few days the blisters appear, usually in



Medical Advice

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clusters that follow a typical linear route. This period of the outbreak can last a few days or be drawn out over the course of a week or so, and the number of clusters can be few or many. The bottom line is that an episode of shingles is exceedingly variable.

Even though the blisters begin to subside, the pain can persist because of the virus's location is at nerve endings. This period of pain is known as post-herpetic neuralgia. Unfortunately, it can be very painful and can last for days, weeks, sometimes even months. Pain medicines generally are very helpful.

The best thing to do when you suspect shingles is to get it checked out as soon as feasible. You can't "cure" shingles since the virus will forever live

on those nerve endings but you can take anti-viral medications which will stunt the episodic outbreak. The caveat here is timing. The sooner the medication is started, the easier it is to slow down the episode. And yes, the blisters are contagious to anyone who has never had chicken pox.

Your questions about Shingles or any other medical issue are always welcome.

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