

# Herpes zoster (shingles)

## What is herpes zoster?

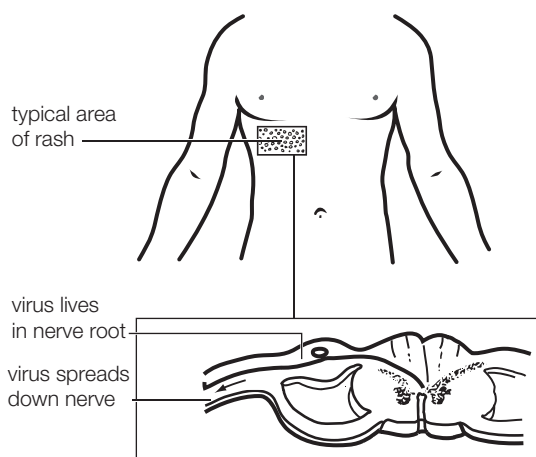
*Herpes zoster* is an infection in a nerve by the virus that causes chickenpox (*varicella*). The term comes from the Greek *herpes* (to creep) and *zoster* (a belt or girdle). *Shingles* is from the Latin *cingere* (to gird) or *cingulum* (a belt). It results in a skin rash with blisters and pain.

## How does it occur?

Contact with someone with chickenpox may cause it, but usually it is a reactivation of the chickenpox virus lying dormant (often for many years) in the root of a nerve in the brain or spinal cord. The dormant virus can be stirred into activity by stress or by the loss of natural immunity as we get older. The virus multiplies and spreads down the nerves, causing pain in the nerve in which it resides.

## Where does it occur?

Almost any part of the body can be involved, but common sites are the right or left side of the chest or abdomen and the face.



Herpes zoster

## What are the symptoms?

Apart from feeling unwell, sometimes with a fever, the main symptoms are pain and a rash.

### Pain

- This can vary from mild to severe.
- It is burning in nature, but can be knife-like.
- It precedes the rash and lasts for 1 to 4 weeks after the blisters disappear; it can persist for several weeks.
- It always improves in time.

### Rash

Groups of blisters appear in the skin that is supplied by the nerve. They itch and become crusted. The rash disappears after about 7 days but will leave scars or discoloured skin.

## Who gets herpes zoster?

This relatively common disease is unpredictable and a person of any age can be affected. It is seen more often in people over the age of 50; sometimes children will get it during a chickenpox epidemic.

## Is it contagious?

Yes, but only mildly. Rarely, children might acquire chickenpox after contact with someone who has herpes zoster, but it would be very unusual to 'catch' herpes zoster from another person. It is spread when the person comes into contact with the fluid in the blisters.

## Can the problem recur?

It is possible but most unlikely. One attack generally protects you from a second attack and gives lifelong immunity.

## Myths about herpes zoster

It is not true that it is a dangerous disease or that the patient will go insane. Another myth is that a person will die if the rash spreads from both sides and meets in the middle: this is nonsense.

For the majority, herpes zoster is a mild disease and an excellent recovery can be expected.

## What is the treatment?

There is no cure for this viral infection, but you should see a doctor without delay because proper treatment may reduce the severity of the illness and the likelihood of pain after the sores have healed. You should:

- Rest as much as possible.
- Take simple pain-killers, such as aspirin or paracetamol, regularly.
- Avoid overtreating the rash, which may get infected. Calamine lotion may be soothing, but removal of the calamine crust can be painful. A drying lotion such as menthol in flexible collodion is better.
- Modern antiviral drugs are very effective, especially for more severe cases, and are usually prescribed during the first 3 days from the onset of the rash.

## What is post-herpetic neuralgia?

This is the condition of sharp burning or stabbing pain in the nerve after the rash of shingles has disappeared. It is more common in older people and in the nerves on the face. It can persist for months but can be treated with special medication.