

Herpes Zoster or Shingles

What is Herpes Zoster?

It is a viral disease (Varicella or Chicken Pox virus) that causes a characteristic skin rash consisting of small fluid filled vesicles which progress like chicken pox to scabbed lesions. The surrounding skin is red and inflamed. Pain is a very prominent symptom and may go on after the lesions have settled.

Relation to Chicken Pox

This causes a lot of confusion. Basically it is a re-activation of the Chicken Pox. You have to have had Chicken Pox to develop Shingles. The virus from the Chicken Pox lies dormant in the nerves until for one reason or another it is reactivated causing shingles.

You cannot catch Shingles but you can give Chicken Pox to someone who has not had Chicken Pox.

Precautions: Avoid contact with Babies and young children as they can catch chicken pox from you.

Why have I developed Shingles

Often it is due to be run down or reduced immunity, but age is the most important risk factor in that it occurs more frequently as we get older. 50% of people will develop this by 80 years old but only 15% of people will develop the shingles around the eye, most have it around the chest (50%) but can affect any part of the body.

How does Herpes Zoster Ophthalmicus affect the eye

10% of people who have shingles around the eye, will develop problems with the eye. Most people will have a slightly red eye, but the more serious complications are inflammation of the iris (Uveitis or Iritis) and raised pressure in the eye (A form of Glaucoma). Very rarely the Optic Nerve of the eye can become involve (Optic Neuritis). This is why the Doctor will have arranged for your eye to be checked. You will notice this because the eye may become painful or the vision blurred.

Typical History

3-5 Days of pain around the eye, forehead and scalp followed by a Red Vesicular rash extending from the forehead back through the hair and forward to the eye lid. This condition only affects one side of your head and you will note a very prominent demarcation line down the midline of your forehead. Sometimes the rash can extend to the end of the nose as well with a few vesicles appearing here.

What is the treatment

There is fortunately a specific antiviral drug for the virus .(Acyclovir, Famciclovir or Valaciclovir) However to be effective it must be given within 3 days of the onset of the pain and is taken a tablet 5 times per day. This helps to reduce the length of the illness and the residual pain. For the eye Topical antiviral and steroids are often used.

In addition medication to control the pain are required and Non Steroidal anti inflammatories like Ibuprofen are better than Paracetamol. If this does not control the pain sometimes stronger pain killers are needed or Amitriptyline (often used as antidepressant but very effective in Shingles) is used. The pain is different to an ordinary headache hence why different pain killers are used, paracetamol is not very helpful.

To the skin itself Boracic acid 1% and Celestone are helpful.

How Long does it take to resolve

Unfortunately it does take 2-4 weeks or longer to resolve. The pain can continue for longer and this is where Amitriptyline is often used to try to control the long term sensitivity of the skin and pain.