

# Shingles

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Shingles (also called herpes zoster) is a painful, blistering rash. It is caused when the virus that causes chickenpox (varicella-zoster virus) reactivates in the body. Shingles only affects people who have previously had chickenpox. Shingles can affect people of any age, but is more common in those over 50. It rarely affects children under 3 years old. If someone gets shingles, prompt treatment with antivirals can reduce its severity and duration. Antivirals should be started as soon as possible after diagnosis.

## How it spreads

Shingles itself does not spread between people. However, the varicella-zoster virus can spread from someone with shingles to others. This can cause chickenpox in people who are not immune.

The virus spreads through airborne droplets when an infected person coughs or talks. It can also spread if someone touches the fluid from the blisters and then touches their mouth, nose or eyes.

Vaccination against shingles is available through the Australian National Immunisation Program and is free for eligible people most at risk.

## Exclusion period

Exclude children until blisters have dried and crusted.

Adults who can cover the blisters are not excluded (they are excluded if blisters cannot be covered).

## Risks in pregnancy

If you are infected with the varicella-zoster virus in the first 3 months of pregnancy, it may affect your unborn child.

Seek medical advice within 48 hours if you are exposed to someone who has shingles and you are pregnant, have not had chickenpox before and have not been vaccinated. You may need a blood test to check if you have antibodies against the virus. If you do not, you will need an injection of antibodies (known as varicella-zoster immunoglobulin, or VZIG).

You can be vaccinated against chickenpox, but vaccination is not recommended during pregnancy. Pregnancy should also be avoided for 1 month after having a chickenpox vaccination.

## Actions for educators and other staff

Follow the exclusion period in the *Staying healthy* guidelines.

Talk to your public health unit for advice about pregnant women and anyone who is immunocompromised.

Anyone who works with children and has not previously had chickenpox should be immunised against chickenpox, or be certain that they are immune by having a blood test. Immunisation against shingles is also available. It is not free for people aged under 65, but staff should see their doctor if they are interested in getting the shingles vaccine.

Ensure staff and children have good hand hygiene.

Ensure staff use appropriate cleaning practices, as described in the *Staying healthy* guidelines.

## Actions for parents and carers

Keep your child at home until their blisters have dried and crusted. See your doctor if you think your child may have shingles, particularly if the rash is near their eyes.

The childhood vaccination schedule includes vaccinations against chickenpox (varicella). This will protect children who have not yet been infected.

## More information about shingles

See healthdirect for more information on prevention, diagnosis and treatment of shingles ([healthdirect.gov.au/shingles](http://healthdirect.gov.au/shingles)).

To find out if a child needs medical help:

- use the online symptom checker ([healthdirect.gov.au/symptom-checker](http://healthdirect.gov.au/symptom-checker))
- speak to a registered nurse by calling the 24-hour health advice hotline on 1800 022 222.