

FACTS ABOUT Postherpetic Neuralgia

WHAT IS SHINGLES?

The varicella-zoster virus (VZV) causes shingles. VZV also causes chicken pox. Most people get chicken pox when they are young. After chicken pox heal and go away, the virus can stay inside the body. The virus will not bother most people again. For some, the virus will become active later in life and cause shingles. It is important to note that a person cannot have shingles if he/she has not had chicken pox before.

Shingles will most often occur on one side of the chest or back. The face and eyes can also be affected. A painful rash and blisters will form in the shingles area. This rash will usually last for 1 to 2 months.

WHY DID I GET SHINGLES?

Shingles occurs when the virus that caused chicken pox in the past becomes active. However, it is not fully known why the virus becomes active again. There are a few things that can increase the risk of reactivating the virus. These are:

- Older age
- Medicine or medical conditions that weaken the body's defenses.

Your doctor can look at your medical history, medicines, and other information to find out why shingles occurred.

WHAT IS POSTHERPETIC NEURALGIA?

Postherpetic neuralgia (PHN) is when pain lasts for 3 months or more after the shingles rash has healed.

HOW IS PHN DIFFERENT FROM OTHER TYPES OF PAIN?

When most people think of pain, they think of an injury to a part of our body (cut or bruise). We feel pain because nerves carry a signal to our brain telling it the body is hurt. Nerves act like wires to carry signals from one part of the body to another. Once the area heals, the nerves no longer send a signal for pain and the area feels better.

PHN is different because the pain does not go away when the shingles rash has healed. The nerves are damaged and keep sending a pain signal.

IS PHN THE SAME FOR EVERYONE?

The pain of PHN can differ from person to person. The pain is usually described as "stinging," "burning," "throbbing," and "shock-like." Some people may have mild pain that does not affect their normal activities (working, driving). Others can have severe pain from things that normally would not be painful, such as the wind, rough

clothing, or cold/hot temperatures. Your doctor can provide more information on PHN.

DO ALL PERSONS WITH SHINGLES GET PHN?

No, only about 10 to 15 of every 100 people with shingles will get PHN. There are a few factors that increase a person's risk for PHN:

- Older age
- Having pain before the shingles rash appears
- If pain during the rash is severe
- Having shingles of the eye

If you think that you may have PHN, you should talk with your doctor.

CAN I PREVENT PHN?

Work is being done to see if PHN can be prevented. For now, you can best manage PHN by telling your doctor if you think you may have shingles. This should be done as soon as you can. Also, tell your doctor if pain goes on after shingles has healed. Only your doctor can tell you the best way to lessen the pain that occurs with shingles.

HOW IS PHN TREATED?

Many pain medicines have been used to treat PHN. Yet, only 2 are approved by the FDA to treat PHN. One is taken by mouth. The other is put on the skin.

Talk with your doctor about which treatment is best for you.

Reference:

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