

What is varicella zoster/herpes zoster?

Varicella zoster virus (VZV) causes varicella (chickenpox), when a person is first infected. After the first infection the virus stays in the body and hides in nerve cells. Herpes zoster (shingles) results from a reactivation of the hidden infection.

Who gets varicella zoster/herpes zoster?

Most cases of chickenpox occur in childhood. However chickenpox can occur in the 2-8% if adults have not had the disease. Chickenpox tends to occur in late winter and early spring. Approximately 3 to 4 million cases of chickenpox occur every year in the US, 90% of which are in children below 4 years of age. Shingles does not seem to occur at any specific time of the year and tends to occur more frequently in patients with cancer, other immunosuppressed patients and persons under stress.

How is the virus spread?

The varicella zoster virus replicates in the nasopharynx or upper respiratory tract. Chickenpox is easily spread from person to person by droplet or airborne spread of respiratory tract secretions or contact with the fluid of the blisters. Contact with blister fluid from shingle lesions can result in chickenpox in a person who has never had chickenpox, but you cannot get shingles from shingles. Shingles come from a reactivation of a previous chickenpox (varicella virus) infection. These lesions are most infectious 24 hours before and up to 48 hours after erupting and are generally not infectious after 7 days.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of chickenpox include generalized, itchy, rash; blisters containing fluid, and tiredness. The blisters commonly occur in successive crops on skin and oral mucous membranes and are more abundant on covered than exposed parts of the body. Illness tends to be more severe in adults.

The symptoms of shingles are eruption of blisters on one side of the body. The chest, lower back nerve roots most commonly involved. Pain occurs in the area 48-72 hours before developing lesions. Lesions develop over 3-5 days, lasting 10-15 days. It may take longer for skin to return to normal.

How soon do the symptoms appear?

Chickenpox occurs in approximately 2-3 weeks after infection.

How long can an infected person spread the virus?

Chickenpox can be spread up to 5 days before the rash occurs and remains infectious until the blisters are crusted or dry.

Shingle blisters are generally not infectious after 7 days.

Can a person get varicella zoster/herpes zoster again?

Antibodies develop and when you recover from chickenpox you generally do not get this disease again. However the virus stays hidden in the nerve cells for life. This is the cause of shingles, which may occur more than once.

What is the treatment for varicella zoster/herpes zoster?

Treatment is usually for immunosuppressed patients, consisting of antiviral medication.

Is there a vaccine to prevent varicella (chickenpox)?

Varicella vaccine was licensed in 1995 and is recommended for routine use in infants over 12 months of age and for susceptible older children, adolescents, and adults.

Children over 12 months of age should receive first dose of vaccine with a second dose is routinely given at 4-6 years. Those 12 years or younger who have not received a second dose should get one at least 3 months after the first dose.

Susceptible persons 13 years of age or older require 2 doses of vaccine separated by an interval of a minimum of 28 days. Varicella virus vaccine provides 70-90% protection against infection and 95% protection against severe disease.

Is there a vaccine to prevent zoster (shingles)?

Yes there is a vaccine for persons 60 years of age or older. Check with your healthcare provider.