

Shingles Raises Heart and Stroke Risk



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Protect Yourself with Vaccination

FEATURE IMPACT

Shingles isn't just a painful rash and nerve pain. It's also linked with a higher risk of serious cardiovascular events, including heart attack and stroke, especially in the weeks to months after infection. However, shingles is largely preventable with vaccination.

The world's leading nonprofit organization focused on changing the future of health for all, the American Heart Association, reminds eligible adults to protect themselves by getting vaccinated and staying on top of their heart health.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about 1 in 3 adults in the U.S. will get shingles in their lifetime. If you've had chickenpox, the virus that causes shingles, also known as herpes zoster, is already inside you. It can "wake up" years later, causing painful blisters and nerve pain that can last for months or longer.

After a shingles episode, one large study published in the "Journal of the American Heart Association" found the risk of heart attack and stroke was nearly 30% higher in the short term and may persist over time.

"Shingles can be very painful and knock you down for weeks," said Eduardo Sanchez, M.D., FAHA, the American Heart Association's chief medical officer for prevention. "It's also associated with a higher chance of heart and stroke problems afterward. If you're 50 or older, or have a weakened immune system, talk to your doctor or pharmacist about the shingles vaccine. It's a simple step that can keep you healthier."

Knowing your risk is the first step toward prevention. Age is the most important risk factor for developing shingles. As people age, their immune systems naturally weaken, making it easier for the virus to reactivate. People over 50, and especially those living with heart disease, diabetes or other chronic illnesses, are more likely to develop shingles.

The risk of serious complications from shingles increases:

- As you get older
- If you take drugs that keep your immune system from working properly, like steroids and drugs given after an organ transplant
- If you have medical conditions that keep your immune system from working properly such as certain cancers like leukemia and lymphoma, or HIV infection

Heart Health Made Simpler

In addition to ensuring you're up to date on your vaccines, talk to your health care professional about ways you can improve your overall heart health. According to the American Heart Association, heart disease remains the leading cause of death, taking more lives in the United States than any other cause.

Following healthy lifestyle guidance like Life's Essential 8 can make inroads toward preventing heart disease and stroke, and improving brain health. The set of four health behaviors (eat better, be more active, quit tobacco and get healthy sleep) and four health factors (manage weight, control cholesterol, manage blood sugar and manage blood pressure) are key measures for improving and maintaining cardiovascular health.

How to Get the Shingles Vaccine

- 1. Check eligibility:** Recommended by the CDC for adults 50-plus and adults 19 and older with weakened immune systems.
- 2. Find a location:** Most national pharmacies, many primary care and specialty clinics and local health departments offer it. Search your pharmacy's app or website, or call your clinician's office.
- 3. Book it:** Make an appointment online or by phone. Same day or walk in options may be available at pharmacies.
- 4. Bring what you need:** Photo ID, insurance card and a list of medicines and allergies. Wear a short sleeve shirt, if you can.
- 5. Plan for two doses, 2-6 months apart:** When you schedule dose one, set a reminder or book dose two before you leave.
- 6. Cost and coverage:** Many health plans, including Medicare Part D, cover shingles vaccination at low or no cost. Check your benefits or ask the pharmacy to verify coverage.
- 7. After your shot:** A sore arm, fatigue, headache or mild fever are common and usually go away in 2-3 days. Call your clinician about severe or persistent symptoms.
- 8. If you've had shingles before:** You can still get vaccinated after you recover. Ask your health care provider about timing.

Learn more at heart.org/shingles.

Signs and Symptoms of Shingles

Symptoms to watch for: tingling, itching or burning on one side of the body or face; a stripe like rash that turns into fluid filled blisters; headache; fever; or chills.

Act fast: If you think you have shingles, contact your health care professional right away. Treatment works best within 72 hours of the rash appearing. If the rash is near your eye or you have eye pain or changes in vision, seek urgent care.

Lasting impact: The rash typically scabs over and clears within 2-4 weeks, but the pain in the rash area can last about a month. The duration of pain seems to increase with age.



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Protect Yourself (and Others) from Shingles

If you have shingles, you can stop the spread by covering the rash and avoiding touching or scratching it. You should also wash your hands often, for at least 20 seconds, and avoid contact with people who may be at heightened risk until your rash scabs over, including:

- Pregnant women who never had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine
- Premature or low-birthweight infants
- People with weakened immune systems