

The risk of getting shingles increases with age

More common in women than men, by age 85 half of all Kiwis will have had the disease.

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Shingles, or herpes zoster, is a viral disease which causes a painful rash, and affects up to a third of New Zealanders, especially as they age. Dr Joan Ingram (Inset right), medical advisor for the University of Auckland-based Immunisation Advisory Centre (IMAC) explains what it is and how it can be avoided.

What exactly is shingles?

Shingles is caused by the varicellazoster virus — the same virus that causes chickenpox. While chickenpox is most common in children, adults who previously had chickenpox can develop shingles when the dormant virus becomes active, as it is no longer kept in check by the body's immune system.

Who is most likely to get it?

Anyone who has been infected with varicella-zoster virus is at risk of developing shingles at some stage in their life. Shingles can affect people of any age, but is more common as we get older. By the age of 85 years, at least half of all Kiwis will have had shingles. Other factors can increase the risk, such as having a weakened immune system, psychological stress or physical trauma. More women than men get it, and there may be a genetic link within families.

What happens when you have shingles?

Shingles is characterised by a painful rash that develops on one area of the body, commonly on the back, abdomen or face. The rash is usually unilateral (on one half of the body), and is quite distinctive in the way it does not cross the midline, usually because it is a reactivation along a nerve from the spinal cord. You might also experience tiredness, fever, headache and an upset stomach. A burning, tingling or itching sensation is often felt under the skin before the rash develops, then small blisters appear on a reddened area of skin. The blisters then crust over, like chickenpox, and over several days to weeks the crusts drop off and the skin heals.

How serious is it?

Shingles can be really painful. If you get it on the face or scalp it can result in complications such as headaches and weakness of the face, causing a droop on the affected side. Some people also develop painful eye or ear inflammation and infections. Nerve damage can occur in the same region as the rash, particularly in the elderly, causing numbness or tingling and nerve pain for months or years after the rash has cleared.

Is there a cure?

There is no cure for shingles, though if it is picked up early enough your doctor will prescribe an antiviral medication to reduce its severity. This is why it is important that if you do get a rash that may potentially be shingles, get medical advice as early as possible. However, it's much better to avoid getting it in the first place.

Can I be vaccinated against it?

The good news is, there are two vaccines available in New Zealand to protect against shingles. Zostavax, which is funded for people 65 and over, contains a weakened strain of varicella-zoster virus. But as it is a live vaccine it cannot be given to people who have weakened immune systems. A second vaccine, vaccine Shingrix, Shingrix is a non-live vaccine, containing a protein that is found on the varicella-zoster virus. This vaccine is not yet funded but can be given from the age of 50 years, including to those who have a weakened immune system. Zostavax is moderately protective against shingles, but becomes less effective with advancing age. Two doses of Shingrix is highly effective in preventing shingles and its complications, with no reduction in effectiveness with advancing age.