

# AUBURN PHARMACY

## Shingles

### A Pharmacist's Perspective

Those who have experienced shingles first hand will be the first to tell you that you don't want them. Shingles severity can range from a minor annoyance to completely debilitating and can even be deadly. As a pharmacist, I get to see the impact shingles can have from several perspectives; emotionally, physically, financially and sometimes even spiritually. Perhaps I relate to my patients too well, but I don't feel that I can provide the care they deserve unless I do just that. Shingles is often misunderstood so I would like to give you some candid perspective and insight into shingles treatment and prevention.

Shingles is caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. Nearly everyone, over 99 percent of Americans, has been exposed to the chickenpox virus. Some people never had the rash, but the virus can still be hiding in their body. It hides in nerves waiting for the immune system to let its guard down so it can resurface as shingles. Usually that takes decades to happen but could happen at any age. About half of all cases happen in those over 60 years old. A pharmacist colleague and close friend of mine, Mike Burns, had shingles before the age of 40, TWICE! When I asked him about his experiences with shingles he said the following

*"As a pharmacist, and a patient, who has had shingles twice prior to age 40, I can give personal testimony to its effects. The first time, while in high school, shingles erupted on my leg and caused a bad rash with considerable pain. It lasted about 10 days. The second time, in my late 30's, it showed up on my back. The rash itself was a minor irritation, but the back pain was tremendous. I had difficulty sleeping for nearly two weeks and it took over a month to completely resolve. This confirmed to me the older we get the greater the effects on the patient. Hence, the greater necessity we get vaccinated. As we age our immune systems weaken and the effects have a greater impact with higher potential for long term complications. It is a travesty if every patient doesn't get vaccinated against such a common disease with a proven method of prevention."*

Shingles usually starts with some local pain, itching or tingling. Then, after a few days a rash starts to erupt on one side of the body or face. Because the virus that causes shingles hides in nerves, the rash and pain typically shows up along the main nerve trunks.

Shingles treatment is complicated. The typical treatment begins with about a week of antiviral medication taken three to five times per day. If started early it could help reduce the duration of symptoms. If started too late, it may not help at all. Treatment also includes pain management. Shingles pain, called post-herpetic neuralgia, is the number one complication from shingles. Since shingles pain involves nerves it is much more difficult to treat. Unlike pain in bones, muscles or organs, nerve pain does not respond as well to the most commonly used pain medications so we are forced to rely on other medications including seizure medications and antidepressants to treat shingles pain. Creams, gels and patches that contain local anesthetics like lidocaine are frequently used as well. With some luck, the pain will go away after a few weeks. Unfortunately, some people aren't that lucky and are plagued with nerve pain for several months or even years. This pain can be physically debilitating and require long term use of medications which can be very costly. Although rare, other severe complications can happen as well. If shingles affects the eyes, partial vision loss or even blindness could occur. Shingles can be responsible for pneumonia, hearing problems, brain inflammation and even death. I asked Margret Chambers, a registered nurse, about her experiences with shingles. She had this to say:

*"Throughout my career as an office nurse in family practice clinics I have seen many patients with shingles, many who have also suffered from post herpetic neuralgia. Shingles pain doesn't always stop when the rash is gone; it can last for months or years even when the virus is no longer active."*

# AUBURN PHARMACY

## Shingles

### A Pharmacist's Perspective (Continued)

So, shingles can be a bit scary. But, it doesn't have to be. Here's the good news: Shingles is preventable!! There is a vaccine available to reduce your chances of ever having to deal with everything I already mentioned. It's called Zostavax. It is approved for anyone over the age of 50 and you can get it without a prescription at many pharmacies. As a matter of fact, many doctors' offices don't administer or stock Zostavax because of insurance billing issues and storage requirements. Medicare covers it but only through the prescription drug benefit, part D, which they cannot bill. Additionally, it must be stored frozen and some offices do not have medication freezers. For these reasons, pharmacists have become the primary providers of shingles vaccine. Most pharmacists now are certified vaccinators and have the ability to administer vaccines and bill insurance and Medicare. And it makes a lot of sense when you think about it: On average, a person will see their doctor only two or three times each year while they will see their pharmacist that many times each month. That makes for many more opportunities to receive vaccines, like flu vaccine, at the appropriate time of the year. Now, don't think that we pharmacists can just go shoot up whomever with whatever we like. All pharmacy based vaccine practices have to operate under protocol of a physician and follow very specific laws and regulations. For instance, our protocol physician must approve what vaccines we can administer, our patient screening documentation, and the emergency procedure we have in place just in case someone has a reaction to a vaccine. If your pharmacy has jumped through those hoops, as most have, you can walk into your pharmacy and get the shingles vaccine without making a doctor's appointment or getting a prescription. And you should! The vaccine is approved for anyone over the age of 50 so many insurance companies cover it at that age. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that anyone over the age of 60. It might be covered by your prescription insurance or your health insurance. The easiest way to learn which will cover it is to ask your pharmacist. And even if you don't have insurance to cover the vaccine it is worth paying for. The cost to treat shingles is much, much higher than the cost of the vaccine even without any insurance. I've crunched the numbers. When you add up the cost of the doctor's appointment and medications for even a mild case of shingles you could be out several hundred dollars. The cash price of the vaccine from a pharmacy, currently, is typically between \$200 and \$250.

It's money well spent. Consider it a one-time insurance policy. I get this question a lot, "Will it completely eliminate my chances of getting shingles?" The answer is, No. No vaccine is one hundred percent effective. But those who still get shingles after getting the vaccine have much less severe cases and, this is the best part, the risk of pain, the post herpetic neuralgia, is greatly reduced.

When I have a patient walk in the door to my pharmacy with shingles I can't help but feel like I've failed them. If I did not offer them the vaccine, if they didn't know that they could have prevented what they now have to endure, if I didn't do my part to take better care of them, then I did fail. I have actually had two patients blame me for getting shingles because I didn't push them hard enough to get the vaccine. I have told myself I will not let that happen again. The CDC says if you are over 60 you should get the vaccine. But you don't need the CDC to tell you that. Your doctor, your doctor's nurse and your pharmacist would all tell you the same thing. And according to a recent Gallup poll, those 3 people are the most trusted professionals you deal with. One in three people will get the shingles. Those are terrible odds. If you don't want to get shingles, get vaccinated. If you have questions, talk to your pharmacist or your doctor. Shingles could be one of the most awful experiences of your life, but it doesn't have to be.



*"Caring for the health of you and your community"*

Nathan Wiehl, Pharm.D.  
Director of Clinical Pharmacy  
Auburn Pharmacy

Sources:

1. Gallup, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1654/honesty-ethics-professions.aspx>
2. CDC, <http://www.cdc.gov/shingles/about/index.html>