

Patient information from BMJ

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Shingles vaccine

The shingles vaccine is designed to protect against painful symptoms caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox.

This virus can 'wake up' after being inactive in the body for many years. These problems usually affect older people.

What is shingles (herpes zoster)?

Shingles is caused by a virus called **varicella zoster**. It is the same virus that causes **chickenpox**. The medical name for shingles is **herpes zoster**.

Chickenpox is a common infection in children. It causes a fever and a rash but usually clears up by itself without causing serious problems.

But the chickenpox virus can remain inactive or 'dormant' in the body for many years after the symptoms have gone. This means that the virus is still there, but it isn't spreading or doing any harm. It's as if it's asleep.

In some older people, though, the virus can reactivate or 'wake up'. If this happens it can cause symptoms similar to chickenpox, but more severe.

Symptoms of shingles include:

- feeling generally unwell
- fatigue (tiredness)
- headache
- pain, burning, tingling, or numbness on an area of skin, usually on the torso (chest, back, and abdomen)
- a rash on the affected area a few days after the pain starts. This rash will develop small blisters. The rash will probably be on one side of your body. Many people get it around their waist, but it can occur anywhere.

Even with treatment, the symptoms usually last between two and four weeks, but some people develop long-lasting pain. **Early treatment** can help prevent long-term problems.

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Some people have a rash involving an eye, which can cause **vision damage** if not treated quickly.

Shingles can sometimes be fatal, but this is rare.

For more information, see our leaflets: *Shingles: what is it?* and *Shingles: What treatments work?*

Who needs the shingles vaccination?

Shingles mainly affects older people, so people tend to be offered this vaccination as they get older. Vaccination schedules vary between countries, so the age at which people are offered the vaccination will depend on where you live.

For example, in the UK, people are offered the vaccine starting at **70 years old**, and you can have it up to the age of **79 years old**. It is not offered to people after that, as it doesn't work very well in those aged over 80.

Is there anyone who shouldn't have the vaccine?

You should not have the vaccine if you are **allergic** to any of its ingredients. Tell the medical staff giving you the vaccine about any allergies you have.

You should also not have the vaccine if you are **pregnant** or think that you might be.

Is it safe?

There have been no major safety problems with the shingles vaccine over many years of use.

But, like all vaccines, it can cause side effects in some people. These include:

- headache, and
- pain, itching, redness, warmth, and bruising where the injection was given (called the injection site).

Any side effects should only last a few days. If they last any longer, talk to your doctor.

Very rarely, the type of vaccine used in the UK can actually cause **chickenpox**. In some countries, including the US, a different shingles vaccine is often used, which does not cause this side effect.

Extremely rarely, the shingles vaccine can cause an extreme **allergic reaction**. The medical staff giving the vaccine will have been trained in how to deal with an allergic reaction.

How is the vaccination given?

The shingles vaccine is given as an injection into the upper arm.

How well does the vaccine work?

The shingles vaccine that's usually used in the UK doesn't give complete protection to everyone. But it seems to reduce the number of people getting shingles by about two thirds.

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And if you do get shingles after having the vaccine, your symptoms are likely to be much less severe than if you hadn't been vaccinated.

The vaccine seems to offer this kind of protection for about five years. But a newer type of vaccine, called an 'inactivated vaccine', seems to offer better protection.

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