

Can you go to work, school or a day care centre?

If the shingles rash is on your body **and** will be completely covered by clothing, then the risk to other people who have no natural immunity to chickenpox will be greatly reduced, so you will be able to return to work/school or day care centre if you feel well enough.

If the rash is weeping and on an area of the body that cannot be covered (e.g. the face or around the eyes) then you should stay off work/school until the rash is completely dry and the vesicles have crusted over.

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And
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SHINGLES INFORMATION LEAFLET



What is shingles?

Shingles is an infection caused by a virus called varicella zoster virus – the same virus which causes chickenpox.

When a person has chickenpox, the virus remains dormant in their body. Later in life, if their immune system is weakened (e.g. by illness, medical treatments such as high dose steroids or chemotherapy) this virus can reactivate.

A person can have shingles more than once.

What are the symptoms of shingles?

Shingles causes:

- A painful itchy rash with blister like spots which contain fluid. The spots are called vesicles.
- The rash usually follows the area where there are nerve pathways –the trunk, the face and around the eyes are often affected. The soft tissues under and around the rash may become swollen for a while due to inflammation.
- Pain-because the rash follows the nerve pathways it can cause severe pain. Sometimes this pain will persist for some time, even after the shingles infection has cleared up.

The blisters then dry up, form scabs and gradually fade away.

Who does it affect?

Shingles can affect anyone who has previously had chickenpox, but it mainly affects adults and in particular those over the age of 40 years.

Can shingles be passed on?

You cannot “catch” shingles; it is **always** caused by a reactivation of the virus that previously caused a person to have chickenpox.

It is possible though to develop a chickenpox infection from close contact with someone who has shingles if you **have not previously had chickenpox**, through direct contact with:

- The fluid contained in the blister like spots of the rash
- Items recently contaminated by this fluid, for example, towels and bed linen.

People who have **not** had chickenpox can develop chickenpox from close contact with shingles as described above. This is especially a risk to those who are immunosuppressed (have a weakened immune system).

To reduce the risk of passing on the virus to others who may not have had chickenpox,

- Do not share towels, go swimming, or play contact sports such as rugby while you have a shingles rash.
- Avoid pregnant women who cannot recall having had chickenpox, immunosuppressed people and babies younger than one month old.

This advice is to play safe, as it is direct contact with the rash that usually passes on the virus to someone who has not had chickenpox. Once your blisters have dried out and scabbed over, you are no longer contagious and you will not need to avoid anyone.

What is the treatment for shingles?

Most people with shingles will require “pain killers” as the rash can cause severe pain. Sometimes your doctor will prescribe other types of medication that may be more helpful in relieving the severe pain and discomfort.

To ease the discomfort from shingles:

- Wear loose fitting cotton clothes to reduce irritating the affected skin.
- Keep the rash clean and dry to reduce the risk of a bacterial infection.
- A non-adherent dressing that covers the rash when it is blistered and raw may help to reduce the pain caused by contact with clothing.
- Avoid the use of antibiotic creams and adhesive dressings, as they can cause irritation and delay the rash healing.
- Sometimes the rash may get infected (e.g. from scratching), if this happens consult your doctor (GP) who may prescribe antibiotics if appropriate.

Anti-viral treatment can be given and is most effective when started in the early stages of shingles (within 72 hours of the rash appearing).

Occasionally shingles may affect a person’s eye (if the rash affects the area of the face around the eye) and the doctor may refer you to an eye specialist.