

Shingles Vaccine

“But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you.” (Psalm 5:10-12)

There is now a vaccine called Zostavax which can greatly reduce the number of Shingles outbreaks a person would otherwise experience. Shingles is a painful rash consisting of blisters that run along nerve pathways. Each outbreak lasts from 2-4 weeks, and the pain can be quite severe. In some cases, the pain lasts a month or more after the blisters disappear. Because this is such a painful condition, there is a great deal of excitement over a new vaccine that has recently been approved.

Only people who have had chicken pox can get shingles. The virus that causes chicken pox does not go away—instead it hides in nerve cells that are located near the spinal cord. In most people the virus will simply be dormant (inactive), but as people age and their resistance weakens, the virus can “come to life.” When it does, the virus multiplies and damages these nerve cells, and that is what causes the pain. The first symptom a person will usually have is pain, itching, or even a tingling on one side of the body or face. Then the virus travels to the skin causing blisters. To make matters worse, some people progress to postherpetic neuralgia, which is severe, chronic pain that lasts long after the initial outbreak. Postherpetic neuralgia causes a great deal of physical and emotional suffering, because even clothing or a cool breeze touching the area can cause excruciating pain.

Major risk factors for developing shingles are advancing age and reduced resistance. Shingles can not be passed on to another person, but the virus could be spread by direct contact to someone who has never had chicken pox, and give them that disease.

Actually, half of all people who reach age 85 will experience shingles. Because people are living longer, there is an urgent need for a vaccine of this kind. This vaccine was only tested on people over 60 years of age, so it is currently not approved for anyone under 60. While it only prevented $\frac{1}{2}$ the number of expected outbreaks, for those who did have an episode, the pain and general discomfort was reduced by 61%, as compared to the placebo group. The study revealed few serious side effects. The good news is that even a person who has had an episode of shingles can get the vaccine and reap the benefits of its protection.

And more good news: the percentage of people who developed postherpetic neuralgia was reduced by $\frac{2}{3}$. The vaccine is not a treatment for anyone with shingles or postherpetic neuralgia, it's meant as a preventative. The Merck pharmaceutical company predicts that this vaccine can prevent 250,000 cases of shingles a year, and greatly reduce the severity of the symptoms in another 250,000. In the U.S., there are over 50 million people over 60, and 95% of them had chicken pox as a child. All these people will be at risk for developing shingles!

Almost anyone can take the vaccine, with the exception being anyone already in a weakened condition from disease.

The initial study followed vaccinated people for four years, and will continue to follow these patients to determine how long the benefits of the vaccine lasts before a booster is needed.

For more info, check out:

www.webmd.com (search shingles vaccine)

www.nih.gov (search shingles vaccine)