WHAT IS SHINGLES?

Shingles is a painful reactivation of the ‘chickenpox virus’ in adulthood

- Shingles (herpes zoster) is an outbreak of a painful rash or blisters on the skin that is caused by a reactivation of the virus that causes chickenpox – the varicella-zoster virus.
- For older people, shingles can be a serious condition – the associated pain can be debilitating and is difficult to treat once established – diminishing the quality of life for those who suffer.
- Shingles incidence has significantly increased in recent years, particularly among those aged over 60 – with GP consultations for shingles among this age group having increased by an estimated 51 per cent in recent years.
- After an episode of chickenpox, the zoster virus lies dormant in the body in nerve roots near the spinal cord. The virus can reactivate decades later causing a shingles infection. With over 97 per cent of Australian adults over 30 exposed to the chickenpox virus, the majority of the population is at risk of developing shingles.
- 1 in 3 Australians will experience shingles in their lifetime, and it is estimated that by 85 years of age, one in every two Australians will have experienced an episode of shingles.

Up to half of people over 50 who have shingles will develop long term nerve pain

- A common yet little known complication of shingles is post-herpetic neuralgia (PHN), a chronic and debilitating form of nerve pain, which is difficult to treat and can persist long after the rash has healed, lasting on average for 3.5 years. The virus can reactivate decades later causing a shingles infection. With over 97 per cent of Australian adults over 30 exposed to the chickenpox virus, the majority of the population is at risk of developing shingles.
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DON’T SHHH SHINGLES

Pain and complications of shingles can be serious and long-lasting

- The pain and discomfort associated with shingles and PHN can be prolonged and disabling, diminishing the individual’s quality of life and ability to function to a degree comparable to that in diseases such as congestive heart failure, heart attack or major depression.
- Approximately half of people with shingles or PHN would describe their pain as “horrible” or “excruciating”, ranging in duration from a few minutes to constant on a daily or almost daily basis.
- PHN can have a considerable effect on sleep and mood and can lead to withdrawal and social isolation.
- PHN can also interfere with a person’s ability to work, with one study finding 65 per cent of those who were working when they acquired shingles have reported an absence from work.
- There is currently no cure for shingles or PHN – Antiviral therapy can reduce the severity and duration of shingles, but does not prevent the development of PHN.
- With Australia’s ageing population, the prevalence of shingles and PHN is expected to increase significantly in the coming years, increasing the burden on the Australian health care system.
References

1. bioCSL. Zostavax® Product Information.