

# Shingles

*A friend of mine sent me this not long ago. I've had shingles. It's not nice. Well worth the read. Italics are mine.*

I'm afraid I don't have all the details in one source. Not even most of them. But anyway, I've given a summary below. If you want references for what I've written, it shouldn't be hard to find them. I write about this because I had shingles and 6 months on am still living with the painful consequences. And it is (sort of) avoidable. And the nastiness of it can be reduced with prompt action.

- Nearly all people got chickenpox as a kid. Unpleasant, but we got over it. Unbeknownst to most of us, the virus wasn't defeated by our bodies. Instead, it lives on, dormant, in nerve bundles next to our spinal chord.
- As you get older, your immune system declines in ability. If you get exposed to chickenpox again, your immunity level goes back up. For many people, that was obtained via exposure to their grandchildren's illness.
- Nowadays however, children are immunised against chickenpox at a young age. Great for them, as they won't get this nasty illness. Or shingles later in life. Over a few generations, chickenpox may even be eradicated. However, it also means that older people's immunity levels to the virus are not boosted.
- So, if you live to a good age, you have a 1 in 2 or 3 chance of developing shingles. This is where the chickenpox virus re-emerges and hits you. You get a rash, that almost always is on one side of your body only – characteristic for diagnosis. The rash is nasty and very painful, depending on where it is located. If you are lucky, it goes away. However, it damages nerves. And if the damage is severe enough, those nerves stay damaged for a long time, even for the rest of your life. The damaged nerves send junk signals to the brain, which it interprets as pain, itch or a combination of these. Potentially severe pain. That never goes away.  
*My shingles were mainly on the right side of my forehead. It was treated very quickly so it never got too bad. But, years later, I still have a nasty itch there much of the time.*
- Although the typical shingles affects the nerves under the skin, it can affect nerves anywhere in the body, as well as other parts of organs. My optometrist told me that it can damage any part of the eye, causing varied problems. You can go blind. I found out that I my eyesight on the affected side has degraded by 2 lines on the eye test chart, almost certainly caused by shingles. It can kill you if it affects some organs. Shingles also increases your risk or cardiovascular disease mortality by around 30%. Yes, that means that you are 30% more likely to die from a heart attack or stroke.
- If you recognise that you have shingles and get a doctor/hospital to prescribe anti-viral medication within 3 days (the sooner the better), the symptoms are usually less and the chances of ongoing pain (called Post Herpetic Neuralgia or PHN) are much reduced. I didn't, because I didn't know what it was.
- The federal government, in their infinite wisdom, recognised the increased danger to older people from the vaccination of children against chicken pox. In fact, they offered free shingles vaccines for all older people, I think of ages 50-70 for some years. But they didn't bother advertising it well, so chances are you probably haven't heard of it, like me. So very few people took up the offer. So, they changed the rules so that now you can only get the free vaccine at age 70. Not before. Not after. And still poorly advertised. And you can certainly get shingles well before 70, although the risk increases as you age.  
*My doctor recommended the vaccination well after I turned 70. I got it. Hopefully it will prevent me from getting it again.*

- There are 2 types of shingles vaccines available in Australia. Zostavax is the one provided free by the government, at age 70. It protects you for only a few years, and isn't even very good at that. Then there is Shingrix, which is much more effective and long-lasting. But it costs around \$450-\$500. Some GP's deny it is even available. But it is, if they try. Is it worth it? Some people we know decided it was, when they heard a neighbour several houses away, screaming from the pain for a week or so.

*I'm not sure which one I got. I think it was the cheap one.*

So, I would like to draw people's attention to...

- the high likelihood of getting shingles, with increased risk compared to people of previous generations
- recognising the symptoms – a rash on one side of the body only
- the need for urgent attention – get anti-virals ASAP, within 3 days
- the potentially very nasty consequences of the illness, including ongoing pain, blindness and substantially higher risk from heart attack and stroke
- considering vaccination, preferably with Shingrix

If drawing other people's attention to shingles results in even 1 person avoiding ongoing severe pain or worse, then I will be happy.