

Investigation

3.3B: Shingles

Have you had **Chicken Pox**? Hopefully not, since there is a **vaccination** that can prevent you ever contracting this viral disease. Ask your parents if you have been vaccinated. But what about your parents and grandparents? When your grandparents were growing up no vaccine existed to prevent chicken pox. If your grandparents had chicken pox, then they are **susceptible** to Shingles.

The **varicella-zoster** virus causes chicken pox. This virus continues to reside in your body even after you fight off the illness. Varicella-zoster can remain **dormant** for years upon years. About **one-third** of chicken pox victims develop Shingles many years later. In fact, most patients suffering from Shingles are over 60 years old. It is rare to see a patient with Shingles under the age of 40.

So how does **Shingles** occur? After many years it becomes active again in some people. When this happens, the patient feels pain, itching, or tingling in the area where a rash will occur in the next few days on one side of the body or face. After the rash appears, within a few days blisters can form at the rash site. The patient might also have a slight fever, headaches, chills, or an upset stomach. The **blisters** scab over in seven to ten days and go away in two to four weeks. During this time the area can remain very painful - indeed the pain can last long after the scabs resolve. When the pain lasts after the **rash** has disappeared it is called post-herpetic **neuralgia** (PHN). Very rarely Shingles can progress to cause **blindness**, hearing loss, **pneumonia**, or **encephalitis**, even death.

The good news is that Shingles is now **preventable**; your parents and grandparents don't have to be victims of Shingles. The Shingles **vaccine** prevents the virus from re-activating. But waiting until Shingles occurs does not work; the **vaccination** must be given before Shingles occurs.

Shingles cannot be passed on to others; but the varicella virus causing chickenpox can. Shingles blisters contain the virus, so it is important to prevent the spread of chickenpox by covering the rash and blisters of Shingles. Pregnant women and people with weak **immune systems**, such as cancer patients, patients taking **steroid** medications, and organ **transplant** patients are at higher risk of contracting chickenpox from contact with the virus in the blisters if they have not yet had it. However, in general, Shingles is less contagious than chickenpox. Don't let your grandparents get Shingles; ask them to get vaccinated!