SHINGLES

WHAT IS SHINGLES?

- Shingles is an infection caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. Following illness with chickenpox, the virus lies dormant in nerve cells and can be reactivated, often many years after the original illness.

WHO IS AT RISK OF DEVELOPING SHINGLES?

- Anyone who has had chickenpox in the past can get shingles. Factors that increase your risk of developing shingles include:
  - Age. Shingles is most common in people over 50 and risk increases with age. The CDC estimates that 1 out of 3 people in the US will develop shingles during their lifetime and that half of people who live to 85 will have at least one episode of shingles.
  - Immune system suppression. Diseases that weaken your immune system, such as HIV/AIDS and cancer, and medical treatments and drugs that lower your resistance to disease such as radiation, chemotherapy, anti-rejection drugs following organ transplants, or prolonged use of steroids like prednisone can increase your risk of shingles.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF SHINGLES?

- Shingles usually affects only a small section of one side of your body. Signs and symptoms include:
  - Pain, burning numbness or tingling
  - A red rash that begins a few days after the pain
  - Fluid-filled blisters that break open and crust over
  - Itching
- Some people also experience:
  - Fever and chills
  - General aches
  - Headache
  - Fatigue

WHAT ARE COMPLICATIONS OF SHINGLES?

- Complications from shingles can include:
  - Postherpetic neuralgia – shingles pain that continues long after the blisters have cleared.
  - Vision loss – shingles in or around the eye can cause painful eye infections and may result in vision loss.
  - Neurological problems – depending on which nerves are affected, shingles can cause encephalitis (inflammation of the brain), facial paralysis, or hearing or balance problems.
Skin infections – bacterial skin infections may develop from improperly treated shingles blisters.

HOW IS SHINGLES TREATED?

- Although there is no cure for shingles, prompt treatment with prescription anti-viral medications can speed healing and reduce the risk of complications. These drugs include:
  - Acyclovir
  - Valacyclovir
  - Famciclovir

IS SHINGLES CONTAGIOUS?

- Shingles can only develop in someone who has had chickenpox in the past; shingles cannot be passed from one person to another. However, the virus that causes shingles can be spread from a person with active disease to a person who has never had chickenpox. In this case, the person exposed to the virus may develop chickenpox, but not shingles.

CAN SHINGLES BE PREVENTED?

- Two vaccines may help prevent shingles:
  - Chickenpox vaccine is usually given to children at 1 and 5 years of age, but may also be given to older children and adults who have never had the disease. The vaccine is required for school entrance in Wisconsin. Although the vaccine does not guarantee you won’t get chickenpox or shingles, it can reduce your chances of complications and reduce the severity of the disease.
  - Shingles vaccine is licensed for administration to people age 50 and up. However, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) guidelines recommend shingles vaccine for adults 60 years and older so your health insurance may not cover the cost of the vaccine if you get it before age 60. Like the chickenpox vaccine, shingles vaccine does not guarantee you won’t get shingles, but will likely reduce the course and severity of the disease and reduce your risk of developing post herpetic neuralgia.

... And on the subject of immunizations, be sure to get your influenza vaccination every year and one Tdap (adult tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis) vaccine in place of one of your adult TD vaccines. TD should be boosted every 10 years, or sooner in the event of an injury putting you at risk of developing tetanus.

Resources for more information on shingles:

http://www.cdc.gov/shingles/about/index.html

http://www.mayoclinic.org/shingles/index.html

http://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/immunization/shingles.htm

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