

## Shingles vaccine: Do you need it?



### What is Shingles?

Shingles is caused by the varicella zoster virus, which also causes chicken pox. As one ages and immune defence goes down, the virus remaining in the body from a past chicken pox infection may come out as shingles. The average lifetime risk for shingles is around 30%, most often occurring in people aged 50 or over. As one becomes older, the higher risk for shingles and the longer and severity the pain. The risk for getting shingles before age 85 can be as high as 50%.

### Symptoms of Shingles

Shingles causes a painful rash (often across the torso) lasting 7-10 days and usually takes 2-4 weeks to completely heal. The main symptom is severe pain, often described as “electrifying” or “burning”. Very rarely, it may cause pneumonia, hearing problems, blindness, meningitis or death. One out of every five patients with shingles may have prolonged nerve pain that persists after the acute infection, called “post-herpetic neuralgia” (PHN). Shingles is not contagious, although exposure to shingles can cause chicken pox in someone who has not had chicken pox or been vaccinated against it. It is important to see your physician as soon as possible when shingles infection is suspected. Antiviral medication and ointments may be prescribed to help the body heal.

### Shingles Vaccine (Shingrix, Zostavax)

Shingrix, available since 2018, can achieve an efficacy of more than 90%. It requires 2 injections, with the second shot given within 2-6 months after the first shot. On the other hand, Zostavax requires only 1 injection, but only gives around 50% protection. If a vaccinated person still gets shingles, these products also reduce the severity of pain and the risk for PHN. **Health Canada recommends all eligible people aged 60 or over to receive this vaccine.** People aged 50 or over may also get vaccinated.

## Possible Reactions After the Vaccine

The shingles vaccine is very safe; some possible reactions include pain, swelling, itching, or rash at the injection site. Some people may experience headaches or fever.

## Who Should Not Get the Vaccine?

Zostavax is a live vaccine, which means that it is not suitable for pregnant women and patients undergoing chemo- or radiation therapies, or other immunosuppressive therapies. In contrast, Shingrix does not have these restrictions.

People experiencing an acute shingles infection also should not receive the vaccine, as the vaccine does not treat shingles. There are currently no studies on the effectiveness of shingles vaccines in patients who have had an infection in the past, thus Health Canada does not actively recommend vaccination in this group; nevertheless, it is safe for those with recurrent shingles to receive the vaccine.

No prescription is required for shingles vaccine.

**If you are aged 50 or over, please consult your physician or pharmacist to see if you may benefit from vaccination.**