

Family Medicine Clerkship: Plain Language Summary



Title: Herpes Zoster Vaccine: Should I get the Shingles Shot?

Name: Jane S. Harris, MS4

Plain Language Summary:

Shingles or Herpes zoster is a painful rash caused by the varicella zoster virus - the same virus that causes chickenpox. The virus lies dormant in the nervous system and shingles is caused by the reactivation of the virus. The rash usually appears

on only one side of the body in a region supplied by a single nerve root. People over the age of 60 are more susceptible to getting shingles. A vaccine (Zostavax) is available that can reduce your risk of getting shingles.

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) and the Centers for Disease control (CDC) recommend that all people over the age of 60 get the shingles vaccine. The vaccine lowers the risk of getting shingles and decreases the risk of later problems. It is not 100% effective, and some patients will develop shingles even after getting vaccinated. If you do develop shingles, the vaccine may decrease the severity and duration of the rash.

The most common problem affecting patients after shingles is lingering nerve pain called postherpetic neuralgia. This pain can last for months to years and can be difficult to treat. While there is no good evidence that the vaccine decreases your risk of getting postherpetic neuralgia if you do develop shingles, it decreases your risk of getting shingles in the first place.

The vaccine is a live, attenuated virus given as a single injection, usually in the upper arm. The most common side effect of the shingles vaccine is local pain, redness, swelling or itching at the site of injection. These reactions are typically mild and resolve within a few days. Since the vaccine is a live, attenuated virus patients with HIV, lymphoma or leukemia, patients on immune system suppressive drugs, patients with active TB or pregnant women or women planning to become pregnant should not receive the vaccine.

The vaccine is covered by Medicare part D and by some health plans. If you are over the age of 60, contact your health plan to see if the vaccine is covered and talk with your primary care provider about getting vaccinated.

Additional Resources:

National Institute of Health Shingles Information Page:

<http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/shingles/shingles.htm>

Centers for Disease Control Shingles Vaccination Information:

<http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/shingles/default.htm>

Mayo Clinic: Shingles Vaccine

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/shingles-vaccine/AN01738>

Key Words:

Shingles

Herpes Zoster

Herpes Zoster Vaccine (Zostavax)

Postherpetic neuralgia

Neuropathic pain

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