



# Zoster (Shingles) Vaccine

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Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) for PATIENTS

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## Other Links

Shingles Vaccine Information Sheet (VIS)  
[www.immunize.org/vis](http://www.immunize.org/vis)  
*Patient information on zoster (shingles) vaccine by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)*

Zoster Vaccine Product Information  
[www.zostavax.com](http://www.zostavax.com)  
*Full prescribing information and patient product information*

## What is zoster (shingles) vaccine?

Zoster (shingles) vaccine is approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the prevention of herpes zoster (shingles) in adults 60 years of age and older. The benefits of the vaccine were shown in a major VA study called the Shingles Prevention Study. It is the only therapy available that prevents shingles.

One shot of the vaccine is given under the skin. No repeat (“booster”) shots are being advised.

## What is herpes zoster?



Image courtesy of  
Centers for Disease Control and  
Prevention / Dr. K.L. Hermann

Herpes zoster is also called **shingles**. It is a painful skin rash due to a nerve infection by the same virus that causes chickenpox.

After causing chickenpox, the virus can remain inactive in the body for many years. It can later become active again and cause shingles.

The rash usually appears on one side of the face or body, starting as painful, itchy skin. It often turns to blisters that break open then scab over. The rash typically lasts for 2 to 4 weeks and can cause severe pain. Pain that occurs with the attack usually gets better with pain drugs, and ends when the rash clears.

Persons with shingles can also have fever, chills, headache, and upset stomach. Serious infections with the virus are rare. They can lead to blindness, deafness, brain swelling (encephalitis), and death.

Some persons, mainly the elderly, have pain that lasts long after the rash has gone. This is a chronic nerve pain called **postherpetic neuralgia (PHN)**. This pain is often quite severe and disabling. It can last for months or even years. Drugs and therapies often do not relieve PHN pain.

Links to VHA PBM Service Web Site ([www.pbm.va.gov](http://www.pbm.va.gov))

VHA Criteria for Use of Zoster Vaccine  
*Guidance on patient selection*

Zoster Vaccine Monograph  
*Full PBM review of zoster vaccine*

VHA National Formulary  
*List of drugs on the VHA National Formulary*

For questions about getting zoster vaccine, patients should contact their health care providers

For questions about this FAQ, contact the PBM Service

<http://www.pbm.va.gov>

## What are my chances of getting shingles?

One cannot be certain about a person's exact chances of getting shingles. But the following factors make people more likely to get it:

- **Chickenpox or chickenpox vaccine.** Only persons who have had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine can develop shingles. Over 90% of adults in the U.S. have blood markers of past chickenpox and are at risk for shingles. Most people have had chickenpox, even though many people don't recall having it.
- **Older age.** People 50 years of age and older are much more likely to have shingles and PHN than younger persons. Older persons may have a higher risk of shingles because of weakened body defenses (immunity) against infections.
- **Weak immunity.** Shingles is more common in persons who have weak defenses against infection.

***Lifetime risk of shingles: 10 to 20 of every 100 persons***

***Incidence of PHN: 10 to 30 of every 100 persons who develop shingles***

Of every 100 persons, 10 to 20 persons will get shingles in their lifetime. Most people have only one bout of shingles. Around 4 of every 100 persons will have more than one bout. Of every 100 persons who get shingles, about 10 to 30 will get PHN.

## Can you "catch" shingles from someone else?



Image courtesy of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

If you have had chickenpox, you cannot "catch" shingles from someone who has shingles.

If you have never had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine, you can get chickenpox from someone who has active shingles. In this case, you should avoid touching any part of a shingles rash on someone else.

## Does the VHA recommend zoster vaccine for all patients?



No, it is not suitable for all patients. The vaccine is advised only for patients who would be most likely to benefit from it, including those who are 60 years of age or older and who have healthy immune systems.

Patients less able to fight infections should not get the vaccine, such as those with HIV/AIDS, those taking certain steroid drugs, those on radiation or chemotherapy, those with certain kinds of cancer, and patients with active, untreated tuberculosis (TB).

You should ask your health care provider whether you are likely to benefit from the vaccine.

## What are the benefits of the vaccine?

Over a 3-year period, the vaccine was shown to

- decrease the relative risk of shingles by 51.3% (a decrease of about 6 cases per thousand person-years)
- decrease the relative risk of postherpetic neuralgia by 66.5% (a decrease of about 0.9 cases per 1000 person-years)



The benefits of the vaccine seemed to drop as patient age increased. The benefits in persons age 80 years and older are uncertain.

The vaccine did not decrease hospitalizations and deaths.

Based on the major study, over a period of 3 years,

- 59 persons would need to get the vaccine to prevent one more person from getting shingles; and
- 363 persons would need to get the vaccine to prevent one more person from getting postherpetic neuralgia.

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## What are the risks of the vaccine?

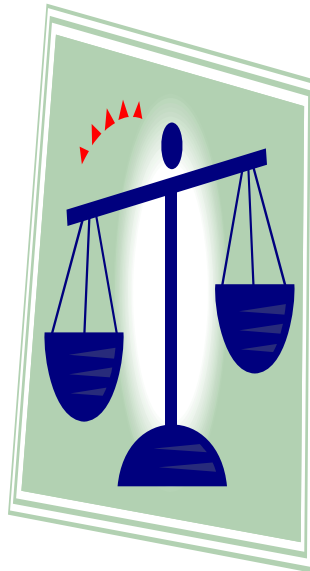
Every medication and vaccine carries some risk.

Patients may have redness, pain, swelling, itching, and warmth at the injection site. These are common and expected side effects.

There is also a risk that patients may still develop shingles and PHN, even though they were vaccinated.

The risk of serious harm or death is likely to be rare; however, a small number of patients who received this vaccine had a serious reaction.

In a subset of patients in the Shingles Prevention Study, there was a small (0.7%) increase in the rate of serious adverse events. This means that, out of every 1000 patients, an additional 7 patients had a serious reaction after vaccination as compared with those who got a dummy (placebo) shot. The higher risk of serious adverse events was felt to be due to chance. However, in light of this finding, the FDA has asked the vaccine maker to do more studies to assess this vaccine's safety.



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## Is the zoster (shingles) vaccine on the VHA National Formulary?



Yes, the zoster / shingles vaccine is on the VA National Formulary.

VHA health care providers can prescribe the vaccine, if it is appropriate for the patient.