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Shingles: A Painful Reality

If you have had chickenpox, you are at risk of developing shingles later on. Most people who were born before 1980 have been exposed to chickenpox, which is also known as the herpes zoster virus and is often considered a childhood disease. For those of us born before 1980, you probably experienced the virus as a child. I can thank my little sister for exposing me to the virus. For most people, chickenpox does not cause any serious complications.

So, if you have had chickenpox, you could develop shingles later in life. The virus that causes the chickenpox never really leaves your body. The virus goes dormant and lives in your nerve cells near your spinal cord and brain. It usually does not cause significant issues until something triggers the virus to become active again. When the virus becomes active again, the outbreak is known as shingles.

The risk of developing shingles increases with age, especially for people over 50, but people at any age can develop shingles after they have had chickenpox. Shingles triggers include high levels of stress, those with weakened immune systems, and age. Shingles commonly present as a painful rash, itching, burning, and tingling sensation isolated to one side of the body. Shingles can be very painful and can last for weeks or months. Shingles spreads to people not exposed to chickenpox through direct contact with the fluid from the skin blisters. If exposed, they can develop chickenpox. Severe complications of shingles can occur if the infected area is on the face and involves the eyes.

What can you do?

If you are over 50, getting vaccinated is the best way to protect yourself from shingles. The Shingrix vaccine is highly effective at preventing shingles. The vaccine is administered in two doses, with the second administered two to six months after the first. Even if you have already had shingles in the past, you can still benefit from the vaccine, which will reduce the chances of getting it again. Even if you believe you have never had chickenpox, healthcare professionals recommend you still get the vaccine. That is because almost all people born before 1980 have been exposed. You may have experienced such a mild case of chickenpox that you were unaware you had it, or you were too young to remember. The vaccine cost is free if you have a Medicare Part D plan.

If you do develop shingles, contact your healthcare provider. Some antiviral medications can help lessen the severity if you take early action.

If you have ever known anyone who has had shingles, you understand how painful and uncomfortable it can be. Shingles can produce long-lasting side effects on one's health and quality of life. The vaccine is a safe, proven way to reduce the likelihood of developing shingles. Ask your healthcare or pharmacist about the shingles vaccination.