

New vaccine can help prevent shingles

By Sinisa Vujkovic, MD

If you've had chickenpox – and 95 percent of adults have – you could get shingles, a potentially debilitating disease caused by the same virus that can cause lifelong pain.

Shingles usually affects older adults. Although chickenpox disappears, the chickenpox virus (varicella zoster) lies dormant in the nerves for years. When it becomes active years later, it is called shingles. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in three people will develop shingles during their lifetime.

But the good news is that there's now a vaccine that can offer some protection against shingles. In 2008, the CDC recommended that people age 60 and older be vaccinated with the Zostavax vaccine. It's a good idea, but not all insurance companies will pay for the injection, which costs about \$220.

Research has shown that older patients who received the vaccine had shingles only half as much as those who didn't. If they got the disease, they had fewer symptoms and less pain. The risk of shingles begins around age 50 and can be brought on by stress or another illness. The severity increases with age.

This is how shingles develops: It often begins with pain in the area where a rash develops on one side of the body a few days later. The rash, which looks like little blisters, can last from a few days to a few weeks. In some people, the pain – which can be excruciating – continues after the rash disappears. The pain is likely to fade away after a few weeks, but it can continue indefinitely.

While it's an extreme case, I have a patient who has a morphine pump implanted in the spine to help control chronic pain from shingles.

Your doctor can help decrease the severity of shingles by giving you an antiviral medication a day or two after the onset of shingles if you haven't received Zostavax. Although it can't make the disease disappear, the medication will decrease the length of time you have the rash as well as the amount of pain after the rash disappears.

It's important to realize that you are contagious when you have shingles. If you have shingles and have children or grandchildren who've never had chickenpox, should be especially careful not to touch them because they can catch chickenpox from you.

Shingles is not usually a life-threatening illness, but it can be a nasty one. The best way to avoid it is to get the Zostavax vaccine. If you think you're coming down with shingles, see your doctor right away to receive the antiviral medication to ensure you will have a milder case.