



Shingles

Shingles is an outbreak of a rash or blisters on the skin that may cause severe pain. Shingles is caused by the varicella-zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox. After an attack of chickenpox, the virus lies silent in the nerve tissue. Years later, the virus can reappear in the form of shingles. Although it is most common in people over age 50, anyone who has had chickenpox can develop shingles. It also is common in people with weakened immune systems due to HIV infection, chemotherapy or radiation treatment, transplant operations, and even stress.

Early signs of shingles include burning or shooting pain and tingling or itching of the skin, generally on one side of the body or face. These warning signs often occur a day or so prior to any signs of a rash or the characteristic blisters. Then, a rash appears as a band or patch of raised dots on one side of the body, commonly on the trunk or face. The rash develops into small, fluid-filled blisters, which begin to dry out and crust over within several days. When the rash is at its peak, symptoms can range from mild itching to intense pain. Many people with shingles have only one bout with the disease in their lifetime. However, those with weakened or impaired immune systems - for example, people with AIDS or cancer - may suffer repeated episodes.

If you suspect you have shingles, see your family doctor right away. The severity and duration of an attack of shingles can be reduced significantly by immediate treatment with antiviral drugs like *Zovirax* (acyclovir), *Famvir*, or others. These drugs also may help prevent the painful after-effects of shingles known as post-herpetic neuralgia.