The Shingles Vaccine May Be Recommended for You

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately one-third of the population will develop shingles in their lifetime. Shingles is a very painful disease caused by the herpes zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox. If you have had chickenpox in the past, you can develop shingles. The herpes zoster virus can be inactive in your body for years and manifest as shingles later in life.

As you get older, the risk for shingles increases. Additionally, people with certain conditions that weaken the immune system are at greater risk for developing shingles. Some examples of these conditions include people with certain cancers, individuals with Human Immunodeficiency Virus, and those who are taking immunosuppressive drugs such as steroids or anti-rejection medications. Unlike chickenpox, some people may develop shingles several times in a lifetime. People with shingles may also transmit the virus to individuals who are unvaccinated or who have never had chickenpox. Infants are not able to receive the chickenpox vaccine until they are 12 months old and remain vulnerable to chickenpox infection, a particularly dangerous condition in infants.

Not only is shingles extremely painful, but the disease can also result in some very severe complications. The most common complication from shingles is post-herpetic neuralgia (PHN). PHN causes severe pain even after the shingles rash has resolved. This condition can last anywhere from a few weeks or months to years. Other more rare complications include eye complications, pneumonia, hearing problems, blindness, brain inflammation or even death.

Fortunately, there is a vaccine that can prevent shingles. The shingles (zoster) vaccine is routinely recommended for everyone 60 and older. The vaccine is approved for use in people 50 and older. Even people who have had shingles before should be vaccinated. NDPERS Group Health Insurance Plan covers the cost of the shingles vaccine and the administration fee for everyone 50 and older – just bring your insurance card with you to your doctor’s office, pharmacy, or local public health unit.

When visiting your health-care provider for shingles vaccine, be sure to ask about other vaccines. Everyone is recommended to receive an annual flu vaccine. Also, people 65 and older should be vaccinated against pneumococcal disease. People with certain high-risk conditions may need other vaccines.

- Provided by the ND Department of Health