

# What do I need to know about the Shingles vaccine?

Several of you reading this article may have recently asked yourself or someone else, “Do I need to get the Shingles vaccine?” If this is true, then this article is just for you!

To begin, you may be wondering, “What is Shingles?” Shingles (also known as Herpes Zoster) is a painful outbreak of a skin rash or blisters. This is caused by the varicella-zoster virus which also causes chickenpox. Symptoms include burning or tingling pain, or even numbness or itching. It often appears on one side of the face or body, and symptoms may last from two to four weeks. Shingles is usually seen spanning one side of the trunk around the waistline. This area is called a dermatome. The pain that is associated with Shingles can be mild or severe. Some individuals experience itching while others feel pain from just a tender touch or breeze. In some cases, people with Shingles will develop long-term nerve pain which is known as postherpetic neuralgia, or PHN. This may last for months or even years after the rash has been healed, and the risk of PHN increases with age.

Furthermore, you can ask yourself, “Am I even at risk for Shingles?” There are several risk factors to consider. Anyone who has had chickenpox may be at risk for Shingles. In fact, if a person has already had chickenpox (98% of adults in the United States have had chickenpox), the Shingles virus is already inside of them. This virus never leaves the body but rather remains in the nervous system and can resurface at any point, therefore causing Shingles. The risk also increases as a person gets older since the immune system becomes weaker with increasing age, allowing Shingles to more easily break through the body’s defenses. In general, Shingles is more common in people who are 50 years of age and older. Shingles is also more prevalent in those with cancer or those taking drugs such as steroids or chemotherapy. If any of these risks apply to you, you should consider receiving the Shingles vaccine.

So now the question is “What is the Shingles vaccine?” The Shingles vaccine is called Zostavax which is a single-shot vaccine that helps prevent the occurrence of Shingles. It is a live attenuated virus vaccine that may be given to those who are 50 years of age and older. However, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), it is recommended that Zostavax be given to individuals who are 60 years of age and older. Zostavax cannot be used to treat Shingles or the nerve pain that may occur after Shingles or to prevent chickenpox. Clinical trials have shown that the vaccine can reduce the risk for Shingles by 50%. However, receiving the Zostavax vaccination does NOT mean that a person will not get Shingles. It is important to note that the vaccination has still been shown to help reduce the pain experienced by those who have developed Shingles after being vaccinated.

Now that you know more about the Zostavax vaccine, you may be wondering, “Is it safe for me to receive the Zostavax vaccine? Is this vaccine for me?” Zostavax is not safe for everyone. Some contraindications include individuals with a history of anaphylactic or anaphylactoid reaction to gelatin, neomycin, or any other vaccine component; individuals with a history of primary or acquired immunodeficiencies such as AIDS or cancer; individuals on immunosuppressive therapy such as high-dose steroids; and pregnant women or women of childbearing age. In addition, patients who are immunocompromised such as those who have undergone a splenectomy, or patients with an autoimmune disease such as rheumatoid arthritis, Hashimoto’s thyroiditis, celiac disease, or multiple sclerosis should also not receive the Zostavax vaccine. Those with a moderate or severe acute illness, including individuals with a temperature of 101.3°F or higher, should also wait until they are healed before receiving the vaccine. Those who have received PNEUMOVAX® 23 should separate that vaccine and Zostavax by at least

four weeks. You should talk with your physician if any of these contraindications are related to you.

Finally, you might want to know “How can I receive this vaccine? Where do I go to get this?” The Zostavax vaccine does require a prescription so you will need to make an appointment with your physician. Also, this will allow you to discuss with your physician if the Zostavax vaccine is appropriate for you. Make sure you tell your physician if you have or have had any medical problems; what medications including prescription and over-the-counter medications, vitamins, and herbal supplements you are taking; any allergies you have; if you have had an allergic reaction to another vaccine; are pregnant or plan to become pregnant; or are breastfeeding. If your physician feels it is safe for you to receive the vaccine and gives you a prescription for it, you should go to a local pharmacy where they give Zostavax vaccinations. Not all pharmacies have pharmacists who are certified to give these vaccinations so you may want to call around to different pharmacies. For some individuals, your insurance may even cover or help cover the cost of this vaccine.

Zostavax is an easy, effective approach to help prevent the occurrence of Shingles! Those who are at risk for Shingles, are able to safely receive the Zostavax vaccination, and are 60 years of age and older should consider receiving this vaccination. Contact The Medicine Shoppe Pharmacy in Norton, Ohio at 330-825-7676 for any questions regarding the Zostavax vaccination.