



Shingles vaccine overview

A vaccine to prevent shingles, a common, painful skin disease is available on the NHS to people in their 70s.

The shingles vaccine is given as a single injection into the upper arm. Unlike the flu jab, you'll only need to have the vaccination once and you can have it at any time of the year.

The shingles vaccine is expected to reduce your risk of getting shingles. If you do go on to have the disease, your symptoms may be milder and the illness shorter.

Shingles can be very painful and uncomfortable. Some people are left with pain lasting for years after the initial rash has healed. Shingles is also fatal for around 1 in 1,000 over-70s who develop it.

It's fine to have the shingles vaccine if you've already had shingles. The shingles vaccine works very well in people who have had shingles before and it will boost your immunity against further shingles attacks.

Who can have the shingles vaccination?

You're eligible for the shingles vaccine if you are aged 70 or 78 years old.

In addition, anyone who was previously eligible (born on or after 2 September 1942) but missed out on their shingles vaccination remains eligible until their 80th birthday.

When you're eligible, you can have the shingles vaccination at any time of year.

The shingles vaccine is not available on the NHS to anyone aged 80 or over because it seems to be less effective in this age group.

You can have it at the same time as your flu jab in the autumn, if you wish.

What is the brand name of the shingles vaccine?

The brand name of the shingles vaccine given in the UK is [Zostavax](#). It can be given at any time of the year.

Read the [patient information leaflet \(PIL\) for Zostavax \(PDF, 177kb\)](#).

How does the shingles vaccine work?

The vaccine contains a weakened chickenpox virus (varicella-zoster virus). It's similar, but not identical to, the chickenpox virus.

Very occasionally, people develop a chickenpox-like illness following shingles vaccination (fewer than 1 in 10,000 individuals).

How long will the shingles vaccine protect me for?

It's difficult to be precise, but research suggests the shingles vaccine will protect you for at least 5 years, probably longer.

How safe is the shingles vaccine?

There is a lot of evidence showing that the shingles vaccine is very safe. It's already been used in several countries, including the US and Canada, and no safety concerns have been raised. The vaccine also has few side effects.

What is shingles?

Shingles, also known as herpes zoster, is a painful skin rash caused by the reactivation of the chickenpox virus (varicella-zoster virus) in people who have previously had chickenpox.

It begins with a burning sensation in the skin, followed by a rash of very painful fluid-filled blisters that can then burst and turn into sores before healing. Often an area on just one side of the body is affected, usually the chest but sometimes the head, face and eye.

Shingles vaccine side effects

Like all vaccines, the shingles vaccine can cause side effects, but they're generally mild and do not last long.

Common side effects of the shingles vaccine, which occur in at least 1 in 10 people, are:

- headache
- redness, pain, swelling, itching, warmth and bruising at the injection site

If any side effects carry on for longer than a few days, speak to your GP or practice nurse.

Tell your GP if you develop a rash after having the shingles vaccination.

Allergic reaction to shingles vaccination

There is a very small chance of a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to the shingles vaccine, as there is with other vaccines.

Anaphylaxis is very serious and potentially life-threatening, but it can be treated. All healthcare staff that deliver vaccinations are trained in this. With prompt treatment, people fully recover from anaphylaxis.

The risk of having a severe allergic reaction after vaccination has been estimated at around 1 in 900,000 (a little more than 1 in a million).

How is shingles spread?

You do not "catch" shingles – it comes on when there's a reawakening of chickenpox virus that's already in your body. The virus can be reactivated because of a range of issues, including advancing age, medicine, illness or stress.

Anyone who has had chickenpox can get shingles. It's estimated that around 1 in 5 people who have had chickenpox go on to develop shingles.

Who's most at risk of shingles?

People tend to get shingles more often as they get older, especially over the age of 70. And the older you are, the worse it can be. The shingles rash can be extremely painful, such that sufferers cannot even bear the feeling of their clothes touching the affected skin.

The pain of shingles can also linger long after the rash has disappeared, even for many years. This lingering pain is called post-herpetic neuralgia (PHN).

There's more information about shingles vaccination in this [NHS leaflet \(PDF, 422kb\)](#).