The shingles vaccine

To help protect you from the pain of shingles

HSC Public Health Agency

Shingles can be very painful, especially for older people and people with a weaker immune system. Sometimes the pain can stop you from doing your normal activities.

But there is a vaccine that can help reduce your risk of developing shingles or, if you do develop shingles, the symptoms will be milder.

This leaflet describes shingles and outlines the benefits of the vaccine and who is eligible.

What is shingles?

Shingles is caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox (the varicella zoster virus). Most adults in Northern Ireland have had chickenpox. When you recover from chickenpox your body destroys most of the virus, but some stays in your body's nervous system. The virus can then affect you again later in life. This can happen when your immune system has been weakened by age, stress, illness or certain treatments that can reduce your immunity.

You cannot get shingles from someone who has chickenpox or shingles. But if you have shingles, someone who has not had chickenpox (usually a child) can get chickenpox from you.

What are the symptoms?

When you get shingles, it usually affects a specific nerve and the area of skin around it, causing a rash with very painful, fluid-filled blisters and often long-term pain. These blisters usually appear on a specific part of one side of the body, usually on the chest, but sometimes they also affect the head, face and eyes. This can cause severe pain and even blindness.

How serious is it?

The shingles rash usually appears a few days after the pain begins and lasts between two and four weeks, but the pain can last much longer. And the older you are, the more likely you are to have long-lasting pain.

In some cases, the pain persists for several months or even years – this is called post-herpetic neuralgia (PHN). One in five people with shingles goes on to develop longer-lasting pain. This pain can be very difficult to treat, but the shingles vaccine reduces the risk of getting shingles and the long-term pain associated with it.

If you think you may have shingles, you should contact your GP (family doctor) practice for an urgent appointment. Early treatment reduces the risk of long-term pain.

Why should I get the vaccine?

The vaccine will reduce your risk of developing shingles. If you do go on to have shingles, the symptoms will be milder and will not last as long as they would have if you had not had the vaccine.

How does the vaccine work?

It helps to build up your immunity to the virus, so your body will fight it off more easily if it affects you again.

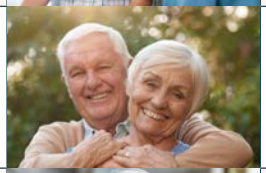
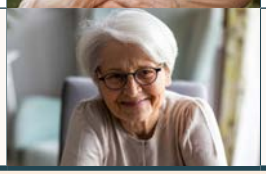
Where is the vaccination given?

Like most vaccinations, the vaccine will be given in your upper arm. You will need two doses, usually at least 6 months apart. If you have a weakened immune system, then your second dose should be at least two months after your first dose.

Who is eligible for the vaccine?

Your GP should contact you and invite you for vaccination if you are:

- aged 65 on 1 September;
- aged 70 on 1 September;
- aged 50 or over on 1 September **and** have a severely weakened immune system (sometimes known as 'severely immunosuppressed'). See table below for more information.

Age and circumstance		Vaccine	How
50 and over AND **identified as having a severely weakened immune system**		Shingrix®	Two doses, 2 months to 6 months apart; injection in upper arm
Age 65		Shingrix®	Two doses 6-12 months apart; injection in upper arm
Age 70		Shingrix®	Two doses 6-12 months apart; injection in upper arm
Age 71-79 never vaccinated		Shingrix®	Two doses 6-12 months apart; injection in upper arm
Age 80 or over		No longer eligible for first dose, but if you have already received one dose of Shingrix, you may still receive a second dose up to your 81st birthday.	
If you have been invited for vaccination by your GP but can't take up the offer immediately, you can still get it up until your 80th birthday (see page 10 for more information)			

How effective is the vaccination?

By having the vaccination, you will significantly reduce your chance of developing shingles. In fact, in the first three years since the shingles vaccine was introduced, there were around 35% fewer consultations for shingles and 50% fewer consultations for PHN. If you do go on to have shingles, the symptoms are likely to be milder and the illness shorter, than if you had not had the vaccination.

How safe is the vaccine?

Like all licensed vaccines, the shingles vaccine has been thoroughly tested and meets UK and European safety and licensing requirements. The shingles vaccine has been in use for over 10 years and is used in several countries including the United States of America and Canada.

Will there be any side effects?

Side effects are usually quite mild and don't last very long. The most common side effects, which occur in at least 1 in 10 people, are headache, redness, pain, swelling, itching, warmth and bruising at the site of the injection. If the side effects persist for more than a few days, you should discuss this with your GP or practice nurse.

You can report suspected side effects on the Yellow Card scheme website. Use your smart phone to scan the QR code on the left.

www.mhra.gov.uk/yellowcard

Can the vaccine give me shingles?

The Shingrix® shingles vaccine is not a live vaccine so it cannot cause shingles. In the unlikely event that you do develop any type of rash, please seek advice from your GP practice.

Are there any people who should not receive the vaccine?

Only those people who have a history of a confirmed anaphylactic reaction to any component of the vaccine may not have the vaccine. Please discuss this with your GP.

If you are feeling very unwell (with a high temperature), or if you have a bleeding problem or bruise easily, speak to your GP before vaccination.

What if I miss my vaccination?

If you missed the shingles vaccine, you can still have it up to your 80th birthday. If you think you are eligible and have not yet received a vaccination, please contact your GP practice to ask about getting vaccinated. It's important that you do not leave it too late to have the vaccination.

Further information

Speak to your GP or practice nurse for more information, or scan the QR code using a smart phone to take you to the website

www.nidirect.gov.uk/conditions/shingles

For more information about the shingles vaccine (Shingrix®), scan the QR code to take you to the website

medicines.org.uk/emc/product/12054/pil

To hear an audio recording of whether you are eligible for the vaccine, you can telephone: 028 9536 2000.

HSC Public Health Agency

Public Health Agency
12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.
Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).
www.publichealth.hscni.net

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