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LESS PAIN, MORE GAIN: shingles pain can turn into chronic pain

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Have you ever had chickenpox? Then you have the virus that causes shingles in your body.

The virus is called Varicella Zoster, which is a herpes type of virus and causes skin rashes and blisters. After the chickenpox lesions heal, this virus moves from skin to a part of sensory nerve roots close to the spinal cord called posterior root ganglia.

The virus can remain dormant for years and start activity when one's immune system is compromised due to an illness such as cancer or AIDS or a stressful event.

The virus then travels along the nerve toward skin, damaging the nerve and causing numbness, itchiness, inflammation and severe pain. When the virus reaches to nerve endings on the skin, it may cause rash and form blisters.

Depending on what nerves are affected, sometimes more serious complications such as a scar on the cornea can be caused. The rashes are painful and usually form a band-like pattern on one side of the body along the affected nerve. The most common areas of body are face, back and chest.

Skin rashes usually heal in two weeks, but it's the pain associated with shingles that can go undiagnosed and untreated.

This pain can linger for weeks, months or even years and is called postherpetic neuralgia (nerve pain). Pain symptoms associated with shingles can range from mild to severe.

"There have been quality of life studies showing that a bad case of shingle pain is worse than a heart attack in terms of how long the pain lasts," said Dr. Karl R. Beutner, associate clinical professor of dermatology at the University of California, San Francisco.

Awareness is important

According to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, almost one out of every three people in the United States will develop shingles. Although shingles occurs in people of all ages, it is most common in 60 to 80 year olds.

Not only age is an important factor in determining who gets shingles, it is also important in determining if one develops postherpetic neuralgia.

As well, older patients usually suffer from more severe symptoms.

Studies suggest the more severe and painful the shingles rash is, the greater the chance of developing nerve pain. It's also suggested that people who do not cope well with stress have worse nerve pain than others.

National Institute of Health Senior pages on shingles, updated in January 2011, puts a perspective to the less recognized complications related to shingles pain: "The burning waves of pain, loss of sleep and interference with even basic life activities caused by shingles pain can cause serious depression."

Treatment options

Postherpetic neuralgia is the most common complication associated with shingles.

The better the pain is controlled and treated in acute phase, the better the chances are to prevent or at least minimize long-lasting chronic nerve pain and other complications associated with shingles pain. Unfortunately, many patients do not get into their doctors' offices early enough.

"On the first day they have a little back pain, and then on the second day they notice a little rash and think maybe it is a spider bite. On Day 3, they notice more pain and rash gets worse, so they call the doctor," said Beutner.

Having pain and then a rash especially in one side of the body is usually a good reason to visit your doctor. Antivirus drugs in combination with pain medication are commonly used to control symptoms. Other options for pain control are using physiotherapy modalities such as TENS unit, laser and acupuncture.

More to know

Shingles is not contagious; however a person who has never had chickenpox before can get them when exposed to shingles. It's uncommon to have shingles more than once in a lifetime, however, if symptoms occur more than once in the same area of the body, it may be an indication of being affected by a different type of virus.

Note: This information should not be used as a substitute for necessary consultations with a qualified health care professional. Always consult a medically trained professional with questions and concerns you have regarding your medical condition.

Gita Mikal is the founder of Pain Management & Fibromyalgia Centre and Physiotherapy at Don Mills. Gita is a practicing physiotherapist with post-graduate training in pain management. She incorporates a variety of therapeutic techniques such as manual therapy, acupuncture and pain education in her treatments. Visit www.physioatdonmills.com, or call 416-444-4800.

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