

**Aged 70?**

**There's a vaccine  
to help protect  
you from the pain  
of shingles**



Public Health  
Agency

**This leaflet describes shingles, the benefits of the vaccination and who is eligible for the vaccine.**

There is a vaccine that helps reduce your risk of developing shingles and reduces the severity of symptoms if you have the disease.

Shingles is caused by the same virus as chickenpox.



Shingles isn't like other infectious diseases because you don't catch it from someone else. Most of us had chickenpox when we were young, although some of us will not be aware that we've had it. If you did have it, then the virus that caused it can stay in your body for the rest of your life without you knowing it is there. If the virus reactivates it causes a disease called shingles.

Shingles can be very painful and tends to affect people more commonly as they get older. **And the older you are, the worse it can be.** For some, the pain caused by shingles can last for many years. Shingles can really affect your life, stopping you from doing all the things you usually enjoy.

Your GP will invite you for shingles vaccination in the year you turn 70. You remain eligible for the vaccine up to your 80th birthday.

## What is shingles?

Shingles (also known as herpes zoster) is caused by the reactivation of an infection of a nerve and the area of skin that it serves, resulting in clusters of painful, itchy, fluid-filled blisters. These blisters can burst and turn into sores that eventually crust over and heal. These blisters usually affect an area on one side of the body, most commonly the chest but sometimes also the head, face and eye.

## How long does it last and how serious can it be?

The rash usually appears a few days after the initial pain and tingling and lasts for about a week. The older you are, the more likely you are to have long-lasting pain. Sometimes shingles develops in the eye and may also affect the eyelid. This can cause severe pain and lead to decreased vision or even permanent blindness in that eye. Most people recover fully, but for some, the pain goes on for several months or even years - this is called post-herpetic neuralgia (PHN).

This is a particularly unpleasant condition with severe burning, throbbing or stabbing nerve pain. The vaccine reduces the risk of developing shingles and PHN. Even if you still have shingles, the symptoms are likely to be less severe.

## What causes shingles?

Shingles is caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox - the varicella zoster virus. When you recover from chickenpox most of the virus is destroyed but some survives and lies inactive in the nervous system. It can then reactivate later in life when your immune system is weakened by increasing age, stress or conditions/treatments that reduce your immunity.

## How do you catch shingles?

You don't catch shingles. Chickenpox virus caught earlier in your life reactivates later to cause shingles. You can't catch shingles from someone who has chickenpox. However, if you have shingles blisters, the virus in the fluid can infect someone who has not had chickenpox and they may develop chickenpox.

## How common is shingles?

About one in five people who have had chickenpox develop shingles. Every year in Northern Ireland, around 1,000 people in their seventies will have shingles. Of these, about 200 go on to develop PHN.

## What vaccines are used?

All adults aged 70 to 80 will be offered the Zostavax vaccine, unless there is a medical reason not to have this vaccine. For those who have a weakened immune system, for example, an alternative vaccine, Shingrix®, is available. See more on page 9.

## 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 Zostavax vaccine was introduced, there have been approximately 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.

## Where is the vaccination given and will I need one every year?

Like most vaccinations, the vaccine will be given in your upper arm. Unlike the flu jab, you do not need to be re-vaccinated every year.

## 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 one in every ten people, are headache, and 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.

## How safe are the vaccines?

Like all licensed vaccines, the shingles vaccines have been thoroughly tested and meets UK and European safety and licensing requirements. The Zostavax vaccine has been used extensively in several countries including the United States of America and Canada.

In the first four years of the shingles vaccination programme more than 2.3 million people were vaccinated in England.



## Who will get the vaccine?

From 1 September 2021, you will become eligible for the vaccine once you've had your 70th birthday, and you remain eligible until your 80th birthday.

## What about people who aren't aged between 70 and 80, will they be getting it?

People under 70 years of age are at lower risk of shingles but will become eligible for the vaccine when they turn 70.

People aged 80 years and over are not eligible for the shingles vaccination because the vaccine becomes less effective as people get older. If you are worried about shingles, speak to your GP.

## Do I need to do anything to get the vaccination?

If you're turning 70, your GP will invite you for vaccination, so you just need to take up the invitation. If you are already over 70 and haven't yet been vaccinated, contact your GP practice to make an appointment to have your vaccination. You remain eligible until your 80th birthday.



## Are there people who shouldn't have the vaccination?

Previously, people with a weakened immune system (for example, due to cancer treatment) couldn't have a shingles vaccine. However, there is now an alternative vaccine, called Shingrix®, available for these individuals aged 70 to 80. Your GP will invite you to get this vaccine if you are eligible. For further information on this alternative vaccine see [medicines.org.uk/emc/product/12054/pil](https://www.medicines.org.uk/emc/product/12054/pil)

## Can the vaccine give me shingles?

Most people do not get a rash from the vaccine but in the rare event that you do, please seek advice from your GP practice.



## What if I miss my vaccination? Can I have it later?

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 make an appointment. It's important that you do not leave it too late to have the vaccination.

## Further information

Speak to your GP or practice nurse, or go to [www.nidirect.gov.uk/conditions/shingles](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/conditions/shingles) for more information.

For more information about the shingles vaccines used routinely (Zostavax®) visit [medicines.org.uk/emc/product/6101/pil](http://medicines.org.uk/emc/product/6101/pil)

For more information about the alternative vaccine (Shingrix®) visit [medicines.org.uk/emc/product/12054/pil](http://medicines.org.uk/emc/product/12054/pil)

Remember, if you are between 70 and 80 and have not been vaccinated against shingles, you remain eligible until your 80th birthday.

## Summary of the disease and the vaccine

### Shingles

- is a common disease that can cause long-lasting, severe pain;
- has been known to cause permanent disability;
- occurs more frequently in those over 70 who are also more likely to have worse symptoms.

### The vaccine

- significantly reduces the number of cases;
- will reduce the severity of symptoms in vaccinated people if they develop the disease;
- cannot cause shingles in healthy people.

Having your routine shingles vaccination is a good way of looking after your health so that you can get on with enjoying life without the pain of shingles.



# Public Health Agency

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