Risk Factors for Shingles

by Rosalyn Carson-DeWitt, MD

En Español (Spanish Version)

A risk factor is something that increases your likelihood of getting a disease or condition.

It is possible to develop shingles with or without the risk factors listed below. However, the more risk factors you have, the greater your likelihood of developing shingles. If you have a number of risk factors, ask your doctor what you can do to reduce your risk.

You can only get shingles if you already had chickenpox, and the dormant virus from your old chickenpox infection becomes reactivated. Since only 20% of people who have had chickenpox eventually develop shingles, researchers are still trying to determine what makes some people more likely to develop shingles than others.

Some of the factors that make people more likely to develop shingles include:

Stress and Fatigue

Excessive emotional and/or physical stress and extreme fatigue may increase your risk of developing shingles.

Medical Conditions

If you have a weakened immune system, you are much more likely to develop shingles. Conditions that increase your risk include:

- History of childhood cancer
- Current cancer, especially Hodgkin’s disease, lymphoma, and leukemia
- HIV infection or AIDS

Medications and Medical Treatments

Certain medical treatments can put you at risk for shingles:

- Radiation therapy
- Immunosuppressant drugs (for organ transplants, cancer, and autoimmune diseases) such as:
  - Chemotherapy treatments for cancer
  - Steroid medications
  - Cyclosporine
  - Azathioprine
  - Cyclophosphamide
  - Chlorambucil
  - Cladribine

Age

People over age 60 are about three times more likely to develop shingles than younger people.

Ethnic Background

Caucasian population are four times more likely than African Americans to develop shingles.

REFERENCES:


Last reviewed September 2011 by Lawrence Frisch, MD, MPH
Last Updated: 9/1/2011