Herpes Zoster (Shingles)  
Patient Education

Herpes zoster presents as a painful rash (shingles) that is caused by the virus that causes chickenpox. It occurs most commonly in patients with lymphoma or Hodgkin’s disease, especially if they have had chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy, but can occur with any type of cancer. Shingles occurs mainly in patients who have previously had chicken pox. The virus from chicken pox can remain quiet in your nerves cells. Factors that lower the immune system can cause the virus to “wake up” and the result is shingles. Examples of things that can lower the immune system making one more susceptible to shingles include; illness (like cancer), surgery, chemotherapy, steroids, radiotherapy, aging, and stress.

Signs and Symptoms
Herpes zoster lesions (sores or lesions) usually appear in clusters or patches and can be red spots or blisters. They may form a line and can occur on one or both sides of the body. If the lesions are on both sides, the herpes is called disseminated zoster. This condition is more concerning. Let your doctor or nurse know if you have lesions on both sides before you come to the hospital or clinic.

Watch for these danger signals; contact your doctor or nurse if you have:

- Fever and itching that can be associated with skin that is sensitive to touch or painful.
- Red spots appearing in clusters or in a line.
- Fluid or pus-filled blisters
- Skin sores of any kind
- Vision changes

Treatment of herpes zoster is directed at helping the sores heal and controlling the pain. Medication may be applied directly to the lesions, given through your vein, or by mouth. If the medication is given through your vein you may need to be in the hospital. Do not use any home remedies or drug store medications on skin sores until you have talked with your doctor or nurse. Keep the sores clean and dry and avoid touching them. Keep your hands clean and wash them immediately after touching any of the sores. The herpes zoster virus is very contagious and can be easily spread to others through the air or by touch. Avoid contact with anyone that HAS NOT had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine and anyone who is pregnant.

If you are being treated in a clinic, call before your arrival if you have or think you may have herpes zoster. You will immediately be placed in a room away from other patients even if your sores are covered. Do not sit in waiting areas or use the cafeteria. You will be seen by a doctor as soon as possible.

One of our concerns is for other cancer patients and those with a decreased immune system in whom a case of chicken pox or shingles could be a very serious illness. Since there are a significant number of children and adults with cancer who have not had chicken pox, it is important to take every precaution to prevent the spread...
Points to Remember

- Report symptoms immediately to your doctor or nurse
- Do not wait in hospital waiting areas or the cafeteria if you have or think you may have herpes zoster.
- Do not treat any sores before talking with your doctor.
- Keep your hands clean and do not touch the sores.
- Vision changes

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