

# BC Cancer Agency Recommendation

## Shingles Vaccine for Patients with Lymphoid Cancer

### 1 What is shingles?

Shingles is a painful skin rash, often with blisters. It is also called Herpes Zoster or just Zoster. A shingles rash usually appears on one side of the face or body and lasts from 2 to 4 weeks. It may cause itching or pain, which can be severe. Other symptoms can include fever, headache, chills and nausea. Rarely, it may cause severe illness or death. About 1 person in 5 has persistent pain long after the rash goes away. This is called **post-herpetic neuralgia**.

Shingles is caused by the Varicella Zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox, which almost everyone who was not immunized against chickenpox has had, even if they cannot remember it. The virus stays in your body, and can cause shingles many years later. Only someone who has had chickenpox – or, rarely, has gotten chickenpox vaccine – can get shingles. You can't catch shingles from another person. However, a person who has never had chickenpox (or chickenpox vaccine) could get **chickenpox** from someone with shingles. This is rare.

Shingles is much more common in people 50 years of age than in younger people. It is also more common in people whose immune systems are weakened because of lymphoid cancer such as lymphoma, myeloma or leukemia or treatment with chemotherapy. At least 100,000 people get shingles each year in Canada.

### 2 Shingles vaccine

A vaccine to prevent shingles is available in Canada. It is called Zostavax®. It reduces the risk of shingles by 50% and can also reduce pain caused by shingles.

A single dose of shingles vaccine is recommended for all adults over the age of 60. In addition, the BC Cancer Agency recommends it **for patients who have lymphoid cancer** as long as they receive the vaccine **when they are not receiving cancer treatment** now and have not for at least 6 months.

### 3 Who should not get shingles vaccine?

- **Anyone who is receiving cancer treatment or had cancer treatment in the last 6 months should not receive shingles vaccine.**
- Anyone who is pregnant, or might be pregnant. Women should not become pregnant until at least 4 weeks after getting shingles vaccine.
- Anyone with a moderate or severe acute illness should wait until they recover. This includes anyone with a temperature of 38.5° C or higher.

### 4 What are the risks from shingles vaccine?

A vaccine, like any medicine, could possibly cause serious problems, such as severe allergic reactions. However, the risk of a vaccine causing serious harm or death is extremely small, less than one in 100,000.

Shingles vaccine has been given to hundreds of thousands of people and no serious problems have been identified.

### **Mild Problems**

- Redness, soreness, swelling, or itching at the site of the injection (about 1 person in 3).
- Headache (about 1 person in 70).

Like all vaccines, shingles vaccine is being closely monitored for unusual or severe problems.

## **5 What if you have an allergic reaction?**

If a severe allergic reaction occurs, it will be within a few minutes to an hour after the shot. Signs of a serious allergic reaction can include difficulty breathing, weakness, hoarseness or wheezing, a fast heart beat, hives, dizziness, paleness, or swelling of the throat.

### **What should you do?**

- **Call** a doctor, or get the person to a doctor right away.
- **Tell** your doctor what happened, the date and time it happened, and when the vaccination was given.

## **6 How can you learn more?**

- The Public Health Agency of Canada provides additional information in its Canada Communicable Disease Report, volume 36, January 2010 (website <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/ccdr-rmtc/10vol36/acs-1/index-eng.php>)

## **7 Where can you get shingles vaccine?**

Your family doctor can arrange for you to be given shingles vaccine.

## **8 Who will pay for the shingles vaccine?**

Shingles vaccine is not currently paid for or provided by the BC Ministry of Health. Its cost may be covered by your third party health insurance.