What is shingles?
Shingles, also called zoster or the herpes zoster virus, is a painful rash caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox.

Who is at risk?
Anyone who has had chickenpox can get shingles, and the risk increases with age. Statistics show the risk as one half of all adults by age 80.

What are the symptoms?
About 2-5 days before a rash develops, there may be a burning, itching, numbness or tingling in the area where the rash will form. Additional symptoms could include fever, headache, nausea and chills.

During the next stage of the illness, a rash of liquid filled blisters appears on the skin with new blisters continuing to appear for up to 5 days. Although almost always on just one side of the body, the blisters can be scattered in patches or form a continuous band on the skin. The rash can range from irritating or itchy to extremely painful and typically lasts up to 30 days. For most people, the pain associated with the rash lessens as it heals.

Can shingles be brought on by stress?
Stress, by itself, does not cause shingles outbreaks. But many people with shingles report they have recently had a stressful event in their lives.

Is shingles contagious?
Shingles cannot be passed from one person to another. However, a person with active shingles can transmit the virus to someone who has never had chickenpox, causing that person to have chickenpox. The virus is spread through direct contact with fluid from the rash blisters, not through sneezing or coughing. A person is not contagious before the blisters appear or after the blisters have developed crusts.

What causes shingles’ pain?
The shingles virus travels through nerve fibers from the spine to the skin. It is the inflammation along the nerve path that causes the rash, and because the inflammation is in a nerve, it causes pain.

What treatments are there for shingles?
Antiviral medication can weaken the virus and may reduce the severity of the nerve damage. A healthcare provider may prescribe antiviral pills along with painkillers. However, it is best to prevent shingles by vaccination.
Who should get the shingles vaccination?
The CDC recommends the shingles vaccine for everyone age 60 and over, regardless of whether or not they previously had chickenpox.

Reimbursement for shingles vaccination
All Medicare Part D plans cover the shingles vaccine. The amount of cost-sharing for vaccination varies. Medicare Part B does NOT cover the shingles vaccine. If one has private insurance or Medicaid, the plan may or may not cover the vaccine; contact the insurer to find out.

Is shingles life-threatening?
Shingles is usually not life-threatening to healthy people. However, in people with a weakened immune system, shingles can be dangerous. A healthcare professional can help provide treatment and monitor the illness’s progress.

What is postherpetic neuralgia (PHN)?
1 in 5 people who get shingles will develop a severe long-term pain syndrome called postherpetic neuralgia or PHN. In surveys, about half of those with the nerve inflammation describe their pain as “horrible” or “excruciating.” It can last for weeks, months or even years after the rash has cleared up. No effective treatment exists for the syndrome.

What are examples of other complications from shingles?
Here is a list of the potential complications that can be caused by shingles:
- Scarring
- Bacterial skin infections
- Decrease in or loss of hearing
- Eye complications such as cataracts
- Facial paralysis on one side
- Muscle weakness
- Extreme sensitivity to touch; pain can be brought on by the touch of clothing or a slight breeze across the skin

At Independence-4-Seniors we can help to encourage and facilitate proper vaccinations as a part of healthy aging at home. To learn more about our home care services or to schedule a free in-home assessment, call us today at (630) 323-4665.

Sources: ShinglesInfo.com, Shingles.com, NIHSeniorHealth