

Ministry of Health

# Ontario Publicly Funded Shingles (Herpes Zoster) Immunization Program: Shingrix<sup>®</sup> Vaccine Information for Patients

Updated August 25, 2022

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a health care professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

## What is shingles?

Shingles, also known as herpes zoster (HZ), is an illness caused by the reactivation of the varicella zoster virus, the same virus that causes chickenpox. Reactivation of the virus causes a painful skin rash with blisters on one side of the body, often in a strip. The illness can be serious and severe in some people.

The most common complication of shingles is prolonged and severe nerve pain. This is known as post-herpetic neuralgia (PHN) and there is no cure for it. As individuals get older, they are more likely to develop PHN and the pain is likely to be more severe.

Shingles may also lead to serious complications involving the eye (herpes zoster ophthalmicus). Rarely, shingles can lead to pneumonia, hearing problems, blindness, brain inflammation (encephalitis) or death.

## Can you get shingles from other people?

Shingles cannot be passed from one person to another through a cough or sneeze or by being close to someone who has shingles. However, the virus (varicella zoster virus) that causes shingles can be spread from a person with a shingles rash in the blister phase to another person who has never had chickenpox. The virus is spread through direct contact with the fluid in the blisters. In such cases, the person exposed to the virus might develop chickenpox, but they would not develop shingles. Once the shingles rash has developed crusts, the infected person is no longer contagious.

## **Who is at risk of getting shingles?**

Shingles can develop at any time following a chickenpox infection and can occur in individuals of any age. However, the risk of shingles increases as individuals get older. In fact, about one in three Canadians will develop shingles in their lifetime and two out of three cases of shingles occur in individuals over 50 years of age.

The severity of shingles and its complications (e.g., post-herpetic neuralgia) increase with age. Individuals with a weakened immune system are also at greater risk of getting shingles. Usually, people who develop shingles only have one episode in their lifetime, but it is possible to have recurring episodes.

The Shingrix<sup>®</sup> vaccine can reduce your risk of getting shingles and the long-term pain caused by PHN.

## **What change is being made to Ontario's publicly funded shingles (herpes zoster) immunization program?**

In mid-October 2020, the Ontario publicly funded shingles immunization program, available for Ontario seniors ages 65 to 70 years, transitioned from funding the Zostavax<sup>®</sup> II (Merck Canada Inc.) vaccine to funding the Shingrix<sup>®</sup> (GSK) vaccine. Shingrix<sup>®</sup> is a recombinant subunit, adjuvanted vaccine indicated for prevention of Herpes Zoster (shingles) and is provided as a 2-dose immunization series.

## **Who is eligible to receive the publicly funded Shingrix<sup>®</sup> vaccine?**

Since September 2016, Ontario has offered seniors 65 to 70 years of age the opportunity to receive a one-time publicly funded dose of Zostavax<sup>®</sup> II through the shingles immunization program.

As of mid-October 2020, Ontario's publicly funded shingles immunization program transitioned from Zostavax® II to Shingrix® vaccine. The program eligibility remains the same, however Shingrix® is provided in a two-dose series. Ontario seniors ages 65 to 70 years will be eligible for the publicly funded Shingrix vaccine, provided they have not received the Zostavax® II vaccine through the Ontario publicly funded shingles immunization program.

Seniors outside the eligibility criteria can speak with their primary health care provider (physician or nurse practitioner) about decisions around shingles immunization and purchasing the vaccine privately.

For more information about the shingles immunization program or the vaccine, please contact your primary health care provider.

## **Can I receive Shingrix® if I previously received a dose of publicly funded Zostavax® II?**

Seniors aged 65 to 70 years who received the publicly funded Zostavax® II vaccine are not eligible for the publicly funded Shingrix® vaccine series. Seniors outside the eligibility criteria for publicly funded Shingrix® vaccine can speak with their primary health care provider about decisions around re-vaccination with Shingrix® by purchasing the vaccine privately.

## **Can I receive Shingrix® if I previously paid for a dose of Zostavax® II?**

Seniors aged 65 to 70 years who previously paid for a dose of Zostavax® II vaccine are eligible for the publicly funded Shingrix® vaccine series. Seniors can speak with their primary health care provider about decisions around re-vaccination with Shingrix®.

## What if I missed my shingles vaccine due to the COVID-19 pandemic and I am no longer in the eligible age cohort (65 to 70 years of age)?

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and response activities, individuals born in 1949 to 1952 who missed the opportunity to receive the publicly funded shingles vaccine, per the Ontario program from 65 to 70 years of age, are eligible to receive Shingrix® and complete the 2-dose series by December 31, 2023.

## Where can I get the publicly funded Shingrix® vaccine?

The publicly funded Shingrix® vaccine will be available to eligible individuals through their primary health care provider (physician or nurse practitioner). Individuals, who are not eligible for the publicly funded shingles vaccine, can purchase the vaccine privately. Ask your primary health care provider for a prescription.

## Who should not receive Shingrix®?

Shingrix® should not be given to individuals who have any allergies to any of the ingredients in Shingrix® vaccine. Those with a severe acute illness with or without fever should usually wait until the symptoms subside before being immunized.

**During the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals with symptoms of acute respiratory infection, including minor symptoms such as sore throat or runny nose, should defer immunization until they have recovered, as they can pose an unnecessary risk to others and health care providers if they have COVID-19. Seniors can speak with their primary health care providers about decisions around vaccination.**

## Is the vaccine safe and effective?

The shingles vaccine is safe and effective for the prevention of shingles and its complications. Studies have shown that the Shingrix vaccine reduced the risk of shingles by 90 % and the risk of post-herpetic neuralgia (the most frequent complication of shingles) by 88-91 %. Waning of protection against shingles appears to occur at a slower rate among recipient of Shingrix® vaccine.

## Does Shingrix® have side effects?

Shingrix®, like all medicines, can cause side effects, although not everyone gets them. The most commonly reported side effects after receiving Shingrix® vaccine are local reactions including pain, redness or swelling at the injection site. Other common side effects that have been reported include headache, stomach and digestive complaints (e.g., nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and/or stomach pain), muscle pain, tiredness, chills and fever. These side effects are typically mild to moderate and on average did not last longer than three days. It is important to discuss the benefits and risks of Shingrix® vaccination with your primary health care provider.

## When should I call my health care provider?

Call your primary health care provider or go to the nearest emergency department if any of the following adverse reactions develop within three days of receiving the vaccine:

- hives
- swelling of the face or mouth
- trouble breathing
- very pale colour and serious drowsiness
- high fever (over 40°C)
- convulsions or seizures
- other serious symptoms (e.g., “pins and needles” or numbness).

## Where can I get more information?

For more information on the publicly funded Shingrix® vaccine, or any vaccine within Ontario's publicly funded immunization program, please visit: [Ontario.ca/vaccines](https://ontario.ca/vaccines). You may also contact your primary health care provider or [local public health unit](#).