

Herpes Zoster (Shingles) Vaccination

Herpes zoster, commonly known as **shingles**, is a painful condition caused by the same virus that leads to chickenpox, the **varicella-zoster virus**. After recovering from chickenpox, the virus remains dormant in the body and can reactivate years later as shingles, especially in older adults or those with weakened immune systems. The good news is that a **shingles vaccine** is available to reduce the risk of developing this painful condition.

What is the Shingles Vaccine?

The shingles vaccine is designed to prevent shingles and its complications. It works by boosting the body's immune system to keep the **varicella-zoster virus** in check, preventing it from reactivating and causing shingles.

There are two types of shingles vaccines:

1. **Zostavax**: This was the first shingles vaccine, which is a live attenuated vaccine, meaning it contains a weakened form of the virus. It's administered as a single dose and provides protection against shingles, but its effectiveness decreases over time.
2. **Shingrix**: A newer, non-live vaccine that is more effective than Zostavax. It's given in two doses, a few months apart, and offers stronger and longer-lasting protection. Shingrix is currently the preferred vaccine due to its higher efficacy.

Who Should Get the Shingles Vaccine?

In South Africa, the shingles vaccine is recommended for:

- **People over the age of 50**: The risk of shingles increases with age, and the vaccine can significantly reduce the chance of developing the disease.
- **People with weakened immune systems**: Those with conditions such as HIV, cancer, or those taking medications that suppress the immune system, are at a higher risk of developing shingles. In some cases, people under 50 may be recommended the vaccine if they are at increased risk.

The vaccine is especially important because shingles can lead to serious complications, such as **postherpetic neuralgia (PHN)**, a long-term nerve pain that can last for months or even years after the shingles rash has cleared.

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How Effective is the Shingles Vaccine?

The shingles vaccine, especially **Shingrix**, is highly effective at preventing shingles and its complications. Studies show that Shingrix is more than **90% effective** in preventing shingles in people over 50, and it remains highly protective for many years after vaccination. It's also very effective at preventing **postherpetic neuralgia**, one of the most painful complications of shingles.

Even if you've already had shingles, getting vaccinated can reduce your risk of having another episode, as shingles can occur more than once in some people.

Are There Any Side Effects?

As with any vaccine, mild side effects can occur. The most common side effects of the shingles vaccine include:

- Pain, redness, or swelling at the injection site
- Fatigue
- Muscle pain
- Headache

These side effects usually go away within a few days. Severe side effects are rare.

Where Can You Get the Shingles Vaccine in South Africa?

The shingles vaccine is available through private healthcare providers and some pharmacies. While it may not be covered by all medical aids, it's worth checking with your healthcare provider about access to the vaccine, especially if you are over 50 or have a weakened immune system.

Why is the Shingles Vaccine Important?

Shingles can cause severe pain and discomfort, especially in older adults, and the risk of complications like **postherpetic neuralgia** can make recovery even more difficult. Vaccination is the best way to protect yourself from shingles and its complications.

By getting vaccinated, you can:

- **Reduce your risk** of developing shingles.
- **Prevent long-term nerve pain** from postherpetic neuralgia.
- Protect your health as you age, when you're more likely to develop shingles.



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References:

1. [South African Department of Health](#)