

Patient information – Accident and Emergency

Ocular Shingles

What is shingles?

Shingles is a skin rash caused by a reactivation of the virus that causes chickenpox (varicella zoster virus). After chickenpox infection, the virus remains in the nerves and can re-emerge at any time. It can affect people of all ages but it is more common as you get older, especially over 50. Those most at risk are the elderly or people with reduced ability to fight infections, those taking medications that affect immunity, for example.

What is ocular shingles?

This is when shingles affects the top of the face, scalp and eye; usually on one side only. It occurs in 10-20% of people with shingles. In some patients, it affects the skin around the eye, in others the eye itself can be involved. It is also called 'herpes zoster ophthalmicus'.

What are the symptoms?

The first symptoms are a tingling, itching or burning sensation, lasting 1-3 days. The symptoms then develop into:

- A red, painful skin rash
- Small fluid filled blisters that turn into scabs lasting 3-6 weeks.
- Eyelid swelling, which can be severe. Sometimes this needs

antibiotics but a cool compress and time to recover is often all that is needed.

How does shingles affect the eye?

Pre-septal cellulitis: inflammation or infection of the skin around the eye.

Conjunctivitis: inflammation or infection of the white of the eye. This can cause a red eye and discharge.

Keratitis: infection of the cornea (the clear surface or 'window' of the eye). This can cause

- a red eye
- eye pain or foreign body sensation
- sensitivity to light
- blurred vision.

Uveitis/Iritis: inflammation in the eye.

Increased pressure inside the eye.

Retinitis: inflammation of the back of the eye (retina).

What is the treatment?

- **Antiviral medication**— a 7-10 day course of antiviral tablets (e.g. aciclovir, valaciclovir) as soon as skin lesions develop. This helps reduce the risk of eye involvement and chronic pain. Antiviral eye gel (ganciclovir) may also be prescribed.
- **Steroid eye drops**— used in cases of inflammation inside the eye. These often need to be decreased very slowly.

