Shingles

What is it?

- Shingles is caused by the same virus (Varicella-zoster) that causes chickenpox. Another name for shingles is Herpes Zoster.
- To get shingles you must have already had chickenpox. After the symptoms of chickenpox go away, the virus continues to live in the nerve cells. During times of emotional stress or when the immune system is weak, the virus can come back as shingles.
- Shingles is a red rash that turns into a group of blisters. These blisters look like chickenpox. The rash usually appears on the chest, stomach or buttocks but can also appear on your forehead, cheeks or around your eye.
- Shingles is painful and causes a burning and tingling feeling. The pain usually starts 2 to 3 days before a rash appears.
- The rash is contagious until it has crusted or scabbed over.
- If the rash covers a wide area of your body, you may have “disseminated shingles”.

How is it spread?

- Individuals who have never had chicken pox can get chicken pox from someone with shingles.

The Varicella-zoster virus can spread from the shingles rash by:

- Direct contact with fluid from the blisters. The virus is present at the site of the rash.
- Coming into contact with equipment or other material that has come into contact with fluid from the blisters.
- Droplets from the respiratory (breathing) tract **if the person has disseminated shingles**.

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Is there treatment for it?

- Antiviral medication may be given to decrease the severity of the symptoms. It is most effective if given when the shingles rash first appears.
- Comfort measures may be given to relieve some of the symptoms until the illness goes away.

What can be done to prevent the spread of it?

- Getting the chickenpox vaccine will decrease the risk of getting chickenpox and shingles.
- If you have a weak immune system and think that you may have been exposed to chickenpox or shingles, contact your healthcare provider to see if you need treatment/vaccine.
- If you've never had chickenpox, try to stay away from anyone who is infected with either chickenpox or shingles until all the blisters have dried and scabs have formed.
- If you have **disseminated shingles** (shingles that have spread) and are admitted to the hospital, you will need to go into Airborne Precautions (usually a separate room) to protect those who have not had chickenpox.

For more information

Toronto Public Health
http://www.toronto.ca/health/chickenpox_factsheet.htm

Stop the spread of germs and infection. Clean your hands.	

This fact sheet provides basic general information only and is to be used as a quick guide, not as a complete resource on the subject. If you have any further questions, ask Infection Prevention & Control or your health care provider.