

Shingles

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THE STORY IN ONE SENTENCE

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“Shingles = sleeping chickenpox virus wakes up in a nerve. Start antivirals (like valacyclovir) within 72 hours to stop nerve damage. Vaccinate adults 50+ with Shingrix to prevent it.”

Normal anatomy — the body's job

After chickenpox, varicella-zoster virus (VZV) hides forever in dorsal root ganglia—nerve bundles next to your spine that relay feeling from your skin. Your immune system (especially T-cells, the soldiers that kill infected cells) patrols constantly and keeps the virus asleep. This standoff stays quiet for decades.

BODY'S JOB

The dorsal root ganglia act like rest stops for sensory nerves. Each ganglion serves one strip (dermatome) of skin on your body. T-cells circulate through and check for any virus trying to wake up, killing it before it can copy itself. As long as your immune system is strong, VZV stays dormant and you feel nothing.

1. You catch chickenpox (VZV) as a child; the virus spreads through your blood and skin.
2. After the rash heals, leftover virus particles travel up sensory nerve endings and hide in dorsal root ganglia near your spine.
3. Your immune system's T-cells surround those ganglia and keep the virus locked in a dormant (sleeping) state.
4. Each ganglion controls sensation for one stripe of skin (dermatome), so the virus sleeps in the nerve that serves that exact area.
5. As long as your T-cell count and function stay strong, the virus never reactivates and you have no symptoms.

What breaks

Your immune system gets weaker (from aging, stress, chemotherapy, HIV, or steroids), so it can't hold the virus down anymore. VZV wakes up in one ganglion, copies itself, and slides down the sensory nerve to the skin strip that nerve controls.

CLINICAL TERM

Reactivation of latent varicella-zoster virus in a dorsal root ganglion, triggered by cell-mediated immunity decline (age >50, immunosuppression, malignancy, chronic steroids, or physiologic stress). Virus replicates and travels anterograde down the sensory nerve axon, causing viremia confined to one dermatome.

How the body compensates

Your body tries to wall off and kill the reactivating virus with inflammation (redness, swelling, blisters), but this immune fight also damages the nerve. The nerve keeps firing pain signals even after the virus is cleared, which can become permanent (postherpetic neuralgia). Vital signs stay normal because shingles is local—not a whole-body infection—but the nerve damage is progressive, and the window to stop it is narrow (72 hours).

1. Innate immune cells (macrophages, natural killer cells) rush to the infected skin and release cytokines (alarm proteins like interferon), causing redness, heat, and swelling—the classic rash.
2. Fluid leaks into the skin, forming vesicles (small blisters) filled with virus, white blood cells, and tissue fluid; this tries to isolate and flush out the virus.
3. The pain you feel is the nerve itself firing wildly because the virus is destroying nerve endings and triggering inflammatory chemicals (like substance P and bradykinin) that amplify pain signals.
4. After 7–10 days, the blisters crust over as your adaptive immune response (T-cells and antibodies) finally kills the virus—but by then, some nerve fibers are already scarred.
5. In 10–20% of cases (higher if you're over 60 or didn't get antivirals), the damaged nerve keeps sending pain signals for months or years—this is postherpetic neuralgia, and it happens because the nerve's myelin (insulation) is stripped and the pain threshold resets lower.
6. Vital signs (heart rate, blood pressure, temperature) usually stay normal because the infection is confined to one nerve and skin strip—it's not sepsis or systemic viremia—but the local nerve destruction is irreversible if you miss the 72-hour treatment window.

Domino effect

1. Immune system weakens (age, stress, or drugs) — T-cells that normally patrol the dorsal root ganglia drop in number or function, so they stop killing VZV-infected nerve cells. The virus wakes up and starts copying itself inside the ganglion.
2. Virus replicates in the ganglion — VZV makes millions of copies of itself inside the nerve cell bodies, building up enough viral load to overwhelm the local immune defenses and spill into the nerve axon (the long wire that runs to the skin).
3. Virus travels down the sensory nerve (prodrome: burning, tingling, itch) — As VZV moves down the axon toward the skin, it inflames the nerve fiber itself. You feel burning, shooting pain, or weird tingling in the dermatome (skin strip) that nerve serves—often 1-5 days before any rash appears.
4. Virus reaches the skin → vesicular rash erupts in a band — VZV spills into skin cells, kills them, and triggers a massive local immune response. Your body floods the area with white blood cells and fluid, forming the classic grouped vesicles (small blisters on a red base) that follow one dermatome—chest, belly, or face—and stop sharply at the body's midline because each nerve serves only one side.
5. Blisters crust over; nerve damage may persist (postherpetic neuralgia) — After 7-10 days, your adaptive immune system clears the virus and the skin heals, but the nerve's insulation (myelin) and pain-sensing fibers are scarred. In older adults or untreated cases, the nerve stays hypersensitive and fires pain signals for months or years—even light touch feels like burning.
6. Complications if the virus spreads or hits critical nerves — If VZV reactivates in the trigeminal ganglion (the nerve cluster for your face), it can infect the cornea (front of the eye) and cause blindness—this is ophthalmic zoster. In immunocompromised patients (HIV, chemo), the virus can spread through the blood to the brain (encephalitis), lungs (pneumonitis), or whole body (disseminated zoster), which is life-threatening.
7. Antiviral treatment (if started ≤ 72 hours) stops the cascade — Acyclovir, valacyclovir, or famciclovir block VZV's DNA copying enzyme, so the virus can't replicate further. This cuts viral load, shortens the rash duration, and—most importantly—reduces nerve inflammation before permanent scarring happens, lowering postherpetic neuralgia risk by ~50%. After 72 hours, the nerve damage is often already set and antivirals help less.
8. Shingrix vaccine prevents reactivation in 90%+ — The recombinant zoster vaccine (Shingrix, two doses) trains your T-cells to recognize VZV surface proteins, boosting the immune patrol around the ganglia. This keeps the virus locked down even as you age, preventing shingles and postherpetic neuralgia. It's recommended for everyone 50+ and immunocompromised adults 19+, even if you've had shingles before.

Symptoms · what the patient feels, and why

- One-sided band or stripe of painful red bumps that turn into blisters: The varicella-zoster virus (the chickenpox germ) hides in a nerve root near the spine after chickenpox heals. Years later, when the immune system weakens (from age, stress, or illness), the virus wakes up and travels down that single nerve, causing a rash in the exact skin patch that nerve feeds — so it stays on one side of the body and follows the nerve's path like a stripe.
- Sharp, burning, or stabbing pain in the rash area, often starting before the rash appears: The reactivated virus inflames the nerve itself (neuritis), sending strong pain signals to the brain even before the skin breaks out. The nerve is being damaged from the inside, which feels like fire, electric shocks, or deep aching along that nerve's territory.
- Tingling, itching, or numbness in the rash area: The inflamed nerve sends mixed-up signals — some fibers fire too much (tingling and itching) while others go quiet (numbness). It is like static on a phone line when the wire is damaged.
- Fever, headache, and feeling wiped out: The immune system detects the virus spreading and releases cytokines (alarm chemicals) that turn on the body's defense mode — raising temperature to slow the virus and making you rest so energy goes to fighting infection instead of daily tasks.
- Blisters that crust over after about a week: The virus multiplies in skin cells, forming fluid-filled blisters packed with virus particles. After the immune system kills the infected cells, the blisters dry out and scab over — usually within 7 to 10 days — as the skin begins to heal.
- Rash on the face or near the eye (ophthalmic zoster): The virus reactivates in the trigeminal nerve (the main face nerve), specifically the upper branch that runs to the forehead, eyelid, and tip of the nose. Because this branch also feeds the eye, the rash can spread to the cornea (the clear window of the eye), risking vision damage.
- Weakness or drooping on one side of the face plus ear blisters and severe ear pain (Ramsay Hunt syndrome): The virus attacks the facial nerve (cranial nerve VII) inside the ear canal. This nerve controls the muscles that move one side of the face and runs right next to the inner ear. Inflammation from the virus paralyzes those muscles (causing droop) and forms painful blisters in the ear, and can also harm hearing and balance.
- Rash spreading to more than one body area or all over the body: In people with very weak immune systems (such as from chemotherapy, HIV, or organ transplant drugs), the virus can break out of the nerve and spill into the bloodstream, spreading to many nerves and skin areas at once (disseminated zoster) — similar to chickenpox all over again.

Focused exam

- One-sided band-shaped rash with fluid-filled blisters (vesicles) that follows a single skin stripe (dermatome): This is the signature of shingles. The varicella-zoster virus (the chickenpox virus) woke up in one nerve bundle near the spine, then traveled down that single nerve to the skin it feeds. Because one nerve goes to one stripe of skin, the rash stops at the middle of the body and never crosses to the other side. Seeing this pattern locks in the diagnosis.
- Sharp, burning, or stabbing pain in the skin area several days before any rash appears: The nerve itself is on fire before the skin shows anything. This happens because the virus is multiplying inside the nerve and causing inflammation (swelling and irritation). Patients often describe pain that feels way worse than a simple skin problem should — that mismatch is a big clue.
- Blisters that dry out, crust over, and scab within 7 to 10 days after they first appear: Shingles has a predictable timeline. If you see fresh blisters, you are in the early window when antiviral medicine can still help a lot. If everything is already crusted over, the outbreak started at least a week ago, and antivirals will not change much. The timeline tells you what to do next.
- Rash on the forehead, tip of the nose (Hutchinson sign), or around the eye: This means the virus hit the ophthalmic branch of the trigeminal nerve (the nerve that runs to the eye). The virus can jump into the eye itself and scar the cornea (the clear front window of the eye), leading to permanent vision loss. This patient needs to see an eye doctor (ophthalmologist) within 24 hours.
- Rash inside or around the ear, with facial weakness or droop on the same side, or hearing loss: This is Ramsay Hunt syndrome — shingles attacked the facial nerve (cranial nerve VII) and the hearing nerve (cranial nerve VIII). Without fast treatment, the facial paralysis and hearing loss can become permanent. Start antivirals and steroids immediately and refer to ENT (ear, nose, throat specialist).
- Rash that spreads beyond one stripe or appears all over the body in a patient with HIV, cancer, or on immune-suppressing drugs: In healthy people, the immune system keeps shingles trapped in one nerve. If it spreads everywhere (disseminated shingles), the immune system is broken and cannot contain the virus. This patient needs hospital admission for IV antiviral medicine (acyclovir) and close monitoring for organ damage.

Diagnostics · every test answers a question

- Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test of blister fluid or scab crust → Is this really shingles, or could it be herpes simplex (cold sores) or a bacterial skin infection?

- Direct fluorescent antibody (DFA) stain of blister fluid → Can we quickly identify varicella-zoster virus antigens (proteins) in the fluid?
- Tzanck smear (scraping from the base of a blister, stained and looked at under a microscope) → Are there multinucleated giant cells (big cells with many nuclei fused together), which appear in herpes-family virus infections?
- Varicella-zoster IgM and IgG antibody blood test → Does the patient have active or past infection, and do they have immunity from prior chickenpox or vaccine?
- HIV test (fourth-generation antigen/antibody combo test) → Is there an underlying immune problem that let the virus wake up?
- Complete blood count (CBC) → Is the white blood cell count abnormal, suggesting immune suppression or another infection?

Treatment logic

- Oral antiviral medicine (valacyclovir 1,000 mg three times daily for 7 days, or acyclovir 800 mg five times daily for 7 days, or famciclovir 500 mg three times daily for 7 days) started within 72 hours of rash onset → These medicines block viral DNA polymerase (the enzyme the virus uses to copy its DNA), so the virus stops multiplying inside nerve cells. This shortens how long the rash lasts (by about 1–2 days), reduces pain during the acute outbreak, and cuts the risk of postherpetic neuralgia (long-lasting nerve pain after the rash heals) by about 50%. The 72-hour window is critical — after that, most viral replication is done and the benefit drops sharply.
- Nerve pain medicine: gabapentin (start 300 mg at bedtime, titrate up to 300–600 mg three times daily) or pregabalin (start 75 mg twice daily, titrate to 150–300 mg twice daily) → These medicines calm overactive nerve firing by blocking calcium channels on nerve cells, which reduces the electric storm of pain signals traveling to the brain. They are especially helpful for the sharp, shooting, burning pain that can last months after the rash heals (postherpetic neuralgia). Start them early in severe cases.
- Topical lidocaine patch 5% (apply to painful area for up to 12 hours per day) or lidocaine gel → Lidocaine blocks sodium channels in nerve endings right at the skin, stopping pain signals before they reach the spinal cord and brain. This provides local relief without the side effects of pills. Works best for surface pain, not deep nerve pain.
- Immediate ophthalmology (eye specialist) referral and topical antiviral eye drops (e.g., ganciclovir gel) or oral antivirals if rash involves the forehead, tip of nose, or eyelid (ophthalmic zoster) → Catches inflammation or infection of the cornea (keratitis), inflammation inside the eye (uveitis), or increased eye pressure (glaucoma) before they cause permanent vision loss. Early treatment with antivirals and steroid eye drops (if no active corneal infection) can save the eye.

- Recombinant zoster vaccine (Shingrix) — two doses, 2 to 6 months apart, for adults 50 and older, or adults 19 and older with weakened immune systems → Trains the immune system to recognize varicella-zoster virus glycoprotein E (a protein on the virus surface) so T-cells (immune fighter cells) stay ready to suppress the virus before it can reactivate. Shingrix is over 90% effective at preventing shingles and postherpetic neuralgia, and protection lasts at least 7 years (likely longer).
- Oral corticosteroids (e.g., prednisone 40–60 mg daily, tapered over 2–3 weeks) added to antivirals in Ramsay Hunt syndrome (facial nerve shingles) → Reduces swelling and inflammation around the facial nerve (cranial nerve VII), which may improve the chance of full recovery from facial paralysis and hearing loss. Must be started within 72 hours, along with antivirals.
- Acetaminophen (up to 1,000 mg every 6 hours) or ibuprofen (400–600 mg every 6–8 hours) for mild to moderate pain and fever → Reduces inflammation and blocks pain signals in the spinal cord and brain, providing temporary relief during the acute rash phase. Safe and easy to access.

Medications

Acyclovir (Zovirax) · Antiviral (nucleoside analog)

Acyclovir tricks the varicella-zoster virus (the chickenpox virus hiding in your nerves) into using it as a fake building block when the virus tries to copy itself. Once the virus grabs acyclovir, the copying stops—like a broken key jamming a lock—so the virus can't multiply and spread to more skin cells.

1. The varicella-zoster virus wakes up from its hiding spot in a nerve root near your spine.
2. The virus travels down the nerve to your skin and starts copying its DNA so it can make more virus particles.
3. Acyclovir enters the infected cell and gets activated by a viral enzyme called thymidine kinase (an enzyme the virus makes but healthy cells do not).
4. The activated acyclovir looks like a real DNA building block, so the virus's copying machine (DNA polymerase) grabs it and plugs it into the new DNA strand.
5. Once acyclovir is in the chain, the DNA chain cannot grow any longer—the copying stops dead.
6. Without new copies, the virus cannot spread to neighboring cells, the rash stops expanding, and the body's immune system can clear out the remaining virus.

SAFETY WATCH

Must be started within 72 hours (3 days) of the rash appearing to work well; after that window, the virus has already done most of its damage. · Drink plenty of water—acyclovir can form crystals in the kidneys if you are dehydrated, especially with IV doses. · Dose must be lowered if your kidneys are not working well (checked with a blood creatinine level), because the drug leaves the body through the kidneys. · Rare: confusion, shaking, or hallucinations if the dose is too high for your kidney function. · Safe in pregnancy (category B); often used to protect the baby if a pregnant person has shingles.

Valacyclovir (Valtrex) · Antiviral (nucleoside analog prodrug)

Valacyclovir is a prodrug—it turns into acyclovir once it is absorbed in your gut. The advantage is that your body absorbs valacyclovir much better than plain acyclovir, so you can take fewer pills per day and still get high levels of the active drug. Once it becomes acyclovir, it works exactly the same way: it jams the virus's DNA-copying machine so the varicella-zoster virus cannot multiply.

1. You swallow valacyclovir; your gut absorbs much more of it than plain acyclovir (about 3 to 5 times better absorption).
2. Enzymes in your gut and liver clip off a chemical tail, turning valacyclovir into acyclovir.
3. The acyclovir enters infected cells and is activated by the viral enzyme thymidine kinase.
4. The virus's DNA polymerase mistakes acyclovir for a real DNA piece and uses it.
5. The DNA chain stops growing, virus copying halts, and the rash stops spreading.

SAFETY WATCH

Start within 72 hours of rash onset for best results. · Stay well-hydrated to protect your kidneys. · Dose must be adjusted if kidney function is reduced (creatinine clearance below 50 mL/min). · Very rare but serious: thrombotic thrombocytopenic purple bleeding blotches (purpura)/destroying red blood cells (hemolytic) uremic syndrome (TTP/HUS) in people with severely weakened immune systems (AIDS, transplant) taking high doses; watch for unexplained bruising, fatigue, or dark urine. · Safe in pregnancy (category B).

Famciclovir (Famvir) · Antiviral (nucleoside analog prodrug)

Famciclovir is another prodrug that your body converts into penciclovir, which works just like acyclovir: it stops the varicella-zoster virus from copying its DNA. Famciclovir is absorbed well and stays active in infected cells for a long time, so it can be dosed less often. It jams the virus's copying machine so the virus cannot make new particles.

1. You swallow famciclovir; enzymes in your gut and liver turn it into penciclovir.

2. Penciclovir enters the infected cell and is activated by viral thymidine kinase.
3. Once activated, penciclovir stays inside the cell much longer than acyclovir (over 10 hours in some studies).
4. The virus's DNA polymerase grabs penciclovir thinking it is a real DNA building block.
5. The DNA chain stops, virus copying halts, and the rash stops spreading.

SAFETY WATCH

Must be started within 72 hours of rash appearing. · Adjust dose if kidney function is impaired (creatinine clearance below 60 mL/min). · Generally well tolerated; rare headache or nausea. · Drink enough fluids to support kidney clearance. · Safe track record; category B in pregnancy (animal studies show no harm, human data limited).

Acetaminophen (Tylenol) or Ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) · Acetaminophen: analgesic/antipyretic (exact mechanism not fully known); Ibuprofen: nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID)

Acetaminophen lowers pain signals in the brain and reduces fever; the exact spot it works is still debated, but it does NOT stop inflammation in the skin. Ibuprofen blocks an enzyme called cyclooxygenase (COX) that makes prostaglandins—chemicals that ramp up pain, heat, and swelling at the rash site. By cutting prostaglandin production, ibuprofen dials down both pain and inflammation.

1. Shingles causes tissue damage and inflammation in the skin, which releases prostaglandins and other pain chemicals.
2. Acetaminophen raises your pain threshold in the brain and spinal cord, so the same signal feels less intense; it also resets the hypothalamus to lower fever.
3. Ibuprofen stops COX-1 and COX-2 enzymes from making prostaglandins, so there is less inflammation, less sensitization of nerve endings, and less fever.
4. Both drugs are metabolized in the liver and leave the body through the kidneys.

SAFETY WATCH

Acetaminophen: do NOT exceed 3,000–4,000 mg per day (adults) or 75 mg/kg per day (children); higher doses can cause liver failure. Check all your medicines—many cold and pain products contain hidden acetaminophen. Avoid alcohol, which increases liver toxicity risk. · Ibuprofen: take with food to protect your stomach. Risk of stomach ulcers and bleeding, especially in older adults or if combined with aspirin, blood thinners, or steroids. Can raise blood pressure and worsen heart failure or kidney disease. Avoid in the third trimester of pregnancy (can harm the baby's heart and kidneys). Limit use to the shortest time and lowest dose that controls pain.

Gabapentin (Neurontin) · Anticonvulsant / neuropathic pain agent

Gabapentin calms overexcited nerves by binding to a calcium channel (a gate on nerve cells that controls how much calcium flows in). When gabapentin plugs this gate, less calcium enters the nerve ending, so the nerve releases fewer excitatory signals (like glutamate). This quiets down the constant pain signals firing from damaged nerves in shingles, especially the burning, shooting, or electric-shock sensations.

1. The varicella-zoster virus damages nerve fibers in the skin and the nerve root, making them fire pain signals non-stop even after the rash starts to heal.
2. These damaged nerves release too much glutamate (the main excitatory neurotransmitter).
3. Gabapentin binds to the alpha-2-delta subunit of voltage-gated calcium channels on the nerve terminals.
4. With the calcium channel partially blocked, less calcium flows into the nerve ending.
5. Less calcium means the nerve releases less glutamate, so fewer pain signals reach the brain.
6. Over days to weeks, the constant burning and shooting pain become less intense.

SAFETY WATCH

Common: dizziness, drowsiness, unsteady walking (ataxia), and swelling in the ankles (peripheral swelling (edema)). Do not drive or operate machinery until you know how it affects you. · Start low (often 100–300 mg at bedtime) and go slow; typical effective dose for nerve pain is 1,800–3,600 mg per day, split into three doses. · Do NOT stop suddenly after weeks of use—taper down slowly to avoid withdrawal symptoms (anxiety, insomnia, pain rebound). · Adjust dose in kidney disease; the drug is cleared by the kidneys. · Rare but serious: increased risk of suicidal thoughts or behavior, especially in the first few months. Watch for new or worsening depression, anxiety, or agitation. · Avoid alcohol, which increases drowsiness and dizziness.

Pregabalin (Lyrica) · Anticonvulsant / neuropathic pain agent

Pregabalin works almost identically to gabapentin: it binds to the alpha-2-delta subunit of calcium channels on nerve endings, reducing calcium influx and cutting down the release of excitatory neurotransmitters like glutamate. This quiets the damaged nerves that are firing pain signals after shingles. Pregabalin is absorbed more predictably than gabapentin, so the dose can often be increased faster.

1. Virus damage leaves nerves hypersensitive and firing constantly.
2. Pregabalin binds to calcium channels on these nerve terminals.
3. Calcium entry drops, so the nerve releases less glutamate.
4. Fewer pain signals reach the spinal cord and brain.

5. Burning, stabbing, and electric-shock pain decrease over several days.

SAFETY WATCH

Common: dizziness, drowsiness, weight gain, swelling in hands or feet, dry mouth, and blurred vision. Avoid driving until you know your response. · Start at 75 mg twice daily (or 50 mg three times daily) and increase every few days; typical target is 150–300 mg twice daily. · Do NOT stop suddenly—taper slowly to avoid withdrawal (insomnia, nausea, headache, anxiety). · Dose adjustment needed in kidney disease. · Rare but serious: increased suicidal thoughts, especially early in treatment. Monitor mood closely. · Avoid alcohol. · Can cause euphoria in some people; has abuse potential (Schedule V controlled substance in the U.S.).

Lidocaine 5% patch (Lidoderm) or topical lidocaine gel · Local anesthetic (sodium-channel blocker)

Lidocaine blocks sodium channels on nerve endings in the skin. Sodium channels are gates that let sodium ions rush into the nerve, which creates the electrical signal that says 'pain.' When lidocaine plugs these gates, the nerve cannot fire, so pain signals from the rash area never start. The patch delivers lidocaine only to the skin, so very little gets into the bloodstream—making it safe and free of sedation.

1. You apply the patch (up to 3 patches at a time) over the painful area for up to 12 hours, then remove for 12 hours.
2. Lidocaine soaks through the top layer of skin (the epidermis) and reaches nerve endings in the dermis.
3. Lidocaine molecules slip into the sodium channels on those nerve fibers and block the channel from the inside.
4. The nerve cannot generate an action potential, so no pain signal travels up to the spinal cord.
5. Local pain, burning, and hypersensitivity (allodynia—pain from light touch) drop within 1–2 hours and last for several hours after you remove the patch.

SAFETY WATCH

Very safe because almost no lidocaine enters the bloodstream from the patch. · Use no more than 3 patches at once, and wear each patch for only 12 hours in a 24-hour period. · Skin irritation (redness, mild rash) can occur at the patch site; try rotating the location. · Do NOT apply over broken or actively blistering skin—wait until blisters have crusted over. · Do NOT cut the patch; the medicine may leak out unevenly. · If you swallow lidocaine patches or use an absurd number, you risk lidocaine toxicity (confusion, seizures, heart rhythm problems), but this is extremely rare with proper use. · Safe in older adults and people with other medical conditions.

Opioid analgesics (e.g. oxycodone, tramadol) · Opioid receptor agonists

Opioids plug into opioid receptors (mu, delta, kappa) in the spinal cord and brain. These receptors are part of the body's natural pain-control system. When an opioid binds, it tells the nerve cell to release less substance P (a pain chemical) and to open potassium channels (which calm the nerve down). The result: pain signals are muffled before they reach the brain's pain centers, and the emotional weight of the pain (how much it bothers you) also drops. Opioids are reserved for severe shingles pain that other medicines do not control, and only for short-term use.

1. Severe shingles pain sends a flood of signals up the spinal cord to the brain.
2. You take an opioid; it is absorbed and crosses into the central nervous system.
3. The opioid binds to mu-opioid receptors on spinal interneurons and projection neurons.
4. This opens potassium channels (making the nerve less excitable) and closes calcium channels (reducing neurotransmitter release).
5. Less substance P and glutamate are released, so fewer pain signals climb to the brain.
6. The brain's pain centers (thalamus, somatosensory cortex) receive a weaker signal, and the limbic system feels less distress.
7. Pain intensity and pain 'badness' both decrease.

SAFETY WATCH

HIGH RISK of dependence, tolerance, and addiction—especially with long-term use. Use the lowest dose for the shortest time. · Common: constipation (almost universal—start a stool softener like docusate or a laxative like senna immediately), nausea, drowsiness, confusion, and itching. · Serious: respiratory depression (breathing slows or stops), especially if combined with benzodiazepines, alcohol, or other sedatives. Risk of fatal overdose. · Avoid driving and operating machinery. · Older adults are more sensitive to side effects, especially confusion and falls. · Taper dose slowly when stopping to avoid withdrawal (sweating, muscle aches, insomnia, agitation). · Keep locked and out of reach of children and others; dispose of unused pills properly (take-back programs or mix with cat litter and seal in a bag). · Monitor for signs of misuse: taking more than prescribed, running out early, asking for early refills, or using opioids to cope with emotional distress rather than physical pain.

Capsaicin 8% patch (Qutenza) or lower-strength cream · Topical TRPV1 agonist (counterirritant / desensitizer)

Capsaicin is the chemical that makes chili peppers hot. It works by overstimulating pain nerve endings that have a receptor called TRPV1. When you first apply capsaicin, it causes intense burning because it floods these nerves with signals. But after a few hours to days, the nerves run out of substance P (the neurotransmitter that carries pain signals) and become temporarily numb. The high-dose 8% patch is applied once in a clinic (under local anesthetic) and can reduce nerve pain for months. Lower-dose creams (0.025%–0.075%) are applied at home several times a day, and they work more gradually by depleting substance P over weeks.

1. Damaged nerves in shingles become hypersensitive and loaded with substance P.
2. You apply capsaicin; it binds to TRPV1 receptors on nerve endings in the skin.
3. TRPV1 opens, and the nerve fires rapidly, releasing a burst of substance P (this causes the initial burning).
4. Over hours to days, the nerve exhausts its store of substance P and cannot restock it quickly.
5. With no substance P to transmit pain signals, the nerve goes quiet—the area becomes less sensitive to touch and burning pain fades.
6. The high-dose patch achieves this in one hour-long application; the low-dose cream takes 2–4 weeks of daily use.

SAFETY WATCH

8% patch (Qutenza): must be applied by a healthcare provider in a clinic. The area is first numbed with topical lidocaine or cooled. The patch stays on for 30–60 minutes (feet) or 60 minutes (other areas). You may feel intense burning during application. Pain relief can last 3 months. Do NOT apply over broken skin. · Low-dose cream (0.025%–0.075%, over-the-counter): apply a thin layer 3–4 times a day. Wash your hands immediately after (or wear gloves). Avoid touching eyes, nose, mouth, or genitals. Expect burning for the first few applications; this usually lessens with continued use. It takes 2–4 weeks to feel the full benefit, so do not give up early. Do NOT use under a heating pad or bandage. Do NOT apply to actively blistering skin. · If burning is intolerable, wash the area with cool water and mild soap; do NOT use hot water (it makes it worse). Milk or yogurt can soothe the skin if water is not enough. · Rarely, a local allergic reaction (red, swollen, itchy skin) can occur.

Red flags

- Rash or pain near the eye or on the tip of the nose (risks vision loss from eye infection)
- Facial weakness, drooping eyelid, or ear blisters (Ramsay Hunt syndrome can cause permanent nerve damage if not treated fast)
- Rash spreads to many body parts or looks like chickenpox all over (sign of disseminated zoster, meaning the virus is in the blood and the immune system is very weak)
- Severe headache, stiff neck, confusion, or trouble staying awake (could mean the virus has reached the brain or spinal fluid, causing meningitis or encephalitis)
- Pain that does not improve after the rash heals or lasts more than 3 months (postherpetic neuralgia, or PHN — nerve damage that causes chronic pain)

Nursing priorities

1. Start antiviral medicine (acyclovir 800 mg five times daily, valacyclovir 1000 mg three times daily, or famciclovir 500 mg three times daily) within 72 hours of rash onset — Antiviral drugs stop the varicella-zoster virus from making more copies of itself inside nerve cells; early treatment shortens how long the rash lasts, reduces severe pain, and lowers the chance of long-term nerve pain (PHN) by about 50 percent.
2. Arrange urgent eye exam (within 24 hours) if rash involves the forehead, upper eyelid, or tip of the nose — The same nerve that brings feeling to the forehead and nose tip also goes to the eyeball (ophthalmic branch of trigeminal nerve); shingles in this area (herpes zoster ophthalmicus) can cause corneal ulcers, uveitis (inflammation inside the eye), and permanent vision loss without rapid eye-doctor treatment.

3. Begin nerve-pain medicine (gabapentin starting at 300 mg three times daily or pregabalin starting at 75 mg twice daily) for burning or electric-shock pain — Shingles damages the myelin coating around nerves, causing abnormal pain signals even from light touch; gabapentin and pregabalin calm overactive nerve cells by blocking calcium channels, stopping the pain messages before they reach the brain.
4. Keep the rash clean and dry; apply loose, non-stick dressings; tell the patient not to scratch or pop blisters — Open shingles blisters contain live varicella-zoster virus that can spread to people who never had chickenpox (causing chickenpox, not shingles); broken blisters also allow skin bacteria like staph or strep to enter, causing secondary bacterial infection (cellulitis or impetigo).
5. Isolate patient from pregnant women, newborn babies, and people with weak immune systems until all blisters have crusted over — Fluid inside shingles blisters carries infectious virus particles; pregnant women exposed to VZV can develop chickenpox that harms the unborn baby (congenital varicella syndrome), and immunocompromised people can get life-threatening disseminated chickenpox from exposure.
6. Apply topical lidocaine 5-percent patches or cream to the rash area up to three times daily for localized pain relief — Lidocaine blocks sodium channels in damaged nerve endings at the skin surface, numbing the area without affecting the whole body; this adds pain relief without the side effects of oral medicines like drowsiness or dizziness.
7. Screen for depression and sleep problems; refer for counseling if severe pain is limiting daily activities — Constant burning nerve pain disrupts sleep cycles and raises stress hormones (cortisol), leading to depression in up to 25 percent of shingles patients; untreated depression makes pain feel worse and slows healing by weakening immune function.
8. Schedule Shingrix vaccine two to six months after the acute rash heals (if patient is age 50 or older and has not received it) — Even after having shingles, the immune system does not build strong enough memory to prevent another episode (about 5 percent of people get shingles twice); Shingrix vaccine trains T-cells to recognize VZV, cutting the risk of repeat shingles by more than 90 percent.

Sources

- CDC — Shingles (Herpes Zoster) Clinical Overview
- ACIP (Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices) — Prevention of Herpes Zoster: Recommendations, 2018
- American Academy of Dermatology — Shingles Diagnosis and Treatment Guidelines
- Cochrane — Antiviral Treatment for Preventing Postherpetic Neuralgia

Last reviewed: 2026-07-07