What you should know about the shingles (herpes zoster) vaccine

What is shingles?
Shingles (also called herpes zoster or zoster) is a painful rash of small, red spots, or blisters. These usually appear on one side of the body, head, or face. In addition to the rash, symptoms of shingles can include fever, headache, chills, and an upset stomach.

What causes shingles?
The same virus that causes chickenpox (varicella) causes shingles. After a person has had chickenpox, the virus lives in an inactive state in the body’s nerve cells. The virus can become active again years later, leading to shingles. You can’t catch shingles from another person; however, in rare cases a person can get chickenpox if exposed to someone with shingles. This can happen if the person hasn’t had either chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine.

Is shingles dangerous?
Shingles usually isn’t dangerous and will clear up on its own. In most cases, the pain from shingles will get better when the rash starts to heal. However, in some people, the pain can last for months, even after the rash has gone away. This is known as postherpetic neuralgia. In very rare cases, shingles can lead to pneumonia, hearing problems, blindness, brain inflammation, or death.

Until recently, treatment for shingles included taking medicines to fight the virus and help ease the pain until the condition cleared up. In 2006, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved the herpes zoster vaccine to help people lower their chances of getting shingles.

Does the vaccine prevent shingles?
Everything we know about the effectiveness of the vaccine is based on a single 3-year study. The study followed 38,000 people between the ages of 60 and 80 who had never had shingles. The study found that the vaccine reduced the risk of getting shingles from 3.3% to 1.6% over the 3 years of follow-up. This is commonly quoted as being a 50% reduction in the risk of getting shingles. Here are some other things we learned from the study:

- The vaccine works better in people who are between 60 and 69 years old than it does in those who are 70 and older.
- The vaccine doesn’t seem to make symptoms any less in people who got the vaccine but still got shingles.
• The chances of having pain lasting at least 3 months after the virus cleared up (postherpetic neuralgia) was reduced from 0.42% to 0.14%.

**How long does protection from the vaccine last?**
We think the shingles vaccine protects for at least 3 years; however, we expect it could last longer. At this time, we don’t recommend that patients receive a second dose (booster).

**Are there any side effects from the vaccine?**
Common side effects from the shingles vaccine include redness, pain, swelling, itching, warmth, and a rash at the site of the injection. Serious side effects from the shingles vaccine are rare.

**Who should get the shingles vaccine?**
You can get the shingles vaccine if you’re between 60 and 79 years old and all the following are true:

• You had chickenpox,
• You don’t have a compromised immune system, and
• You haven’t gotten the chickenpox vaccine.

Adults 80 years and older who meet these criteria can also get the vaccine, but it doesn’t seem to work as well in lowering the chances for getting shingles.

To find out if your benefit plan covers the cost of the vaccine, please call Group Health Customer Service at 1-888-901-4636.

**Who should NOT get the shingles vaccine?**
You should NOT get the vaccine if you have one or more of the following:

• A weakened immune system
• Active, untreated tuberculosis (TB)
• Allergies to gelatin, neomycin, or any other ingredient in Zostavax

Also, anyone who might be pregnant shouldn’t get the vaccine.

**How do I get the shingles vaccine?**
You get the shingles vaccine in one shot under your skin in your upper arm. You can go to the injection room at any Group Health medical center. Or, talk to your doctor when you’re at your next visit.