SHINGLES - USA: (CALIFORNIA) INCREASING INCIDENCE DESPITE VACCINATION
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<http://www.sacbee.com/2014/07/14/6553847/shingles-cases-on-the-rise-in.html>

Shingles cases are on the rise in Sacramento [California] and nationwide [USA], despite availability of a vaccine. The vaccine is marketed for people 60 years of age and older. It came as a surprise to one 57-year-old resident when she was diagnosed with shingles last week [week ending 13 Jul 2014] after enduring a weekend of fatigue, aches, pains and itchiness caused by the infection. "I didn't associate shingles with what was happening to me," said the victim, who lives in Citrus Heights [Sacramento County, California]. "I didn't put 2 and 2 together."

The shingles vaccine, introduced in 2006, has failed to halt a steady rise in US cases of the virus, also known as herpes zoster, since the early 1990s, said Dr. Ben Balatbat, an infectious disease specialist and chairman of the Internal Medicine Department at Mercy Medical Group. Infections have been increasing for people in most age groups, not just the most vulnerable populations, those over 60 or with weakened immune systems, said Dr. Rafael Harpaz, medical epidemiologist at the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s viral disease division. "There's a rise, but nobody knows why," said Dr. Richard DeFelice, medical director of infection control at Sutter Health Sacramento. Shingles occurs only in people who have already had chickenpox, or less commonly, people who have had the chickenpox vaccine, according to the CDC. Unlike chickenpox, people can get shingles more than once. All chickenpox and shingles cases are caused by varicella-zoster virus. "You won't get it for many years, but in the future our immune system weakens and then shingles will attack your nerves in the area where it has been dormant," Balatbat said. While not generally life-threatening, shingles can be excruciatingly painful. "The major problem is that there can be severe pain that lasts a long time," DeFelice said.

The shingles vaccine cuts the risk of developing the illness in half and reduces the likelihood of complications, but most people don't receive it, according to the CDC. The vaccine -- a stronger version of the one administered to prevent chickenpox -- is expensive and often not covered by insurance, Balatbat said. The US Food and Drug Administration has approved the vaccine for people 50 and older. But because the CDC recommends the vaccine only for people older than 60, many insurance companies do not cover it for younger people, according to the CDC website.

The pain of shingles is hard to describe and can't be compared to another illness. The constant ache "that won't go away" travels across the middle of the back along the ribs to the abdomen,
just like the rash does. The rash usually appears in a band, a strip or a small area on one side of the body or face, and it typically lasts for about a week when treated with an antiviral drug, but there is a complication called postherpetic neuralgia, or PHN, which refers to nerve pain that lasts after the illness subsides, DeFelice said. Depending on the person, PHN can linger for weeks, months or years.

The illness tends to be more severe in older people, including a higher risk of PHN and other complications, such as infections of the rash area and nerve damage. One 99-year-old resident of Fair Oaks [Sacramento County, California] still suffers from PHN pain today -- 3 years after having shingles on her back. The patient's physician said she may have this pain for the rest of her life.

About 1/3rd of all people will eventually get shingles, with roughly half of the cases in people who are over the age of 60, the CDC reports. A stronger immune response helps keep the virus contained, but young and healthy people can still get it. While someone with shingles can't pass it on, contact with the rash can transfer the virus -- potentially giving someone chickenpox if they haven't already had it.

The rate of shingles is increasing for all age groups except one: young people, who have generally been vaccinated against chickenpox, according to one study. People 17 and younger who have had the chickenpox vaccine are nearly 5 times less likely to get shingles than those who had chickenpox, according to a separate study in the Journal of Infectious Diseases. Because the chickenpox vaccine has only been available for 19 years, it will be many years before researchers know if it also protects people from shingles as they age.

Some experts have suggested the chickenpox vaccine, introduced in 1995, could be to blame for the overall rise in shingles cases. The idea is that adults previously got an immunity boost when they encountered young people with the chickenpox virus. As the number of children with chickenpox decreased, the theory goes, fewer adults got this boost, causing more of them to get shingles. But the CDC has debunked that theory. The increase in shingles cases began prior to the introduction of the chickenpox vaccine and continued afterward. A similar increase also has been seen in some countries in Asia and Europe that introduced the chickenpox vaccine at different times.

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[Shingles (herpes zoster) is caused by the reactivation of a latent varicella-zoster virus (VZV) infection, sometimes decades after the primary infection. Primary VZV infection typically occurs during childhood and causes chickenpox (varicella) disease. Following primary VZV infection, the virus enters the sensory nerves and travels along the nerve to the sensory dorsal root ganglia and establishes a permanent latent infection. It is not known what causes reactivation of the]
latent virus, which leads to the clinical manifestations of shingles, but reactivation is usually associated with conditions that depress the immune system such as immunosuppressive therapy, HIV infection and/or old age.

The above report highlights the current situation in California, and probably elsewhere in the USA. The balance of opinion appears to favour vaccination for prevention against shingles. However, it is unclear whether the increased incidence of shingles is a consequence of the increased availability and use of vaccine, or related to another factor, such as the increasing incidence of HIV infection.

Advice for and protection against shingles vaccination varies between countries, and there does not appear to be a universally accepted view. It is clear, however, that the risk and severity of shingles is increasing in California. - Mod.CP

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