Shingles (Herpes Zoster)

What is shingles?
Shingles, also called herpes zoster, is a disease caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox. After a person has chickenpox, the virus stays in their body. Later in life, the virus can reactivate and cause shingles.

Shingles is a painful rash that consists of blisters and usually only affects one side of the body. The blisters typically scab over in 7 to 10 days, and clear up within 2 to 4 weeks. People may notice pain, itching, or tingling 1 to 5 days before the rash actually appears.

How is shingles spread?
A person with shingles cannot spread shingles to another person, but a person with shingles can spread the virus to a person who is not immune to chickenpox. The shingles virus is spread through direct contact with fluid from the blisters of the rash. A person is infectious while blisters are present until all blisters have scabbed over.

Persons with localized shingles should keep the rash covered, avoid touching the rash, wash their hands often, and avoid contact with individuals who may be at high risk for serious complications from chickenpox until their rash has scabbed over.

Should someone with shingles stay home from work or school?
In general, as long as the lesion can be covered, a person with shingles does not need to stay home from work or school.

Health care workers and others working with high-risk individuals should remain home from work until the blisters have scabbed over.

Anyone who cannot keep their blisters covered should stay home from work or school until all blisters have scabbed over.

How can you prevent shingles?
Vaccination is the only way to reduce the chance of getting shingles since the virus that causes shingles is already present in anyone who has had chickenpox.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends healthy adults age 50 years and older get two doses of the Shingrix® vaccine 2 to 6 months apart. Shingrix® is preferred over Zostavax®.

The varicella vaccine protects against chickenpox.

How is shingles diagnosed?
Health care providers may diagnose shingles based on symptoms. However, shingles can sometimes be confused with herpes simplex virus or other rash illnesses. Shingles can be more difficult to diagnose in young children or in people with compromised immune systems. In these situations, it may be helpful to confirm a diagnosis with laboratory testing.

Health care providers should confirm all suspected cases of shingles in children younger than age 18 years by sending a skin swab or scab to the MDH Public Health laboratory for testing.
Is there a treatment for shingles?

There are antiviral medications available to shorten the length and severity of the disease. It is important that these medications are started as soon as possible after the rash first appears, so contact your health care provider right away if you think you may have shingles.