

Herpes Zoster (Shingles)

This sheet is about having herpes zoster (shingles) in a pregnancy or while breastfeeding. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider.

What is herpes zoster (shingles)?

Herpes zoster, commonly known as shingles, is a viral disease caused by the same virus that causes varicella (chickenpox), called varicella-zoster virus. Chickenpox happens when a person is first exposed to the varicella-zoster virus. For more information on varicella (chickenpox), please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet: <https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/varicella/>.

When someone has recovered from chickenpox, the varicella-zoster virus can stay inactive in some of the nerves in the body. If the inactive virus later becomes active again, it causes shingles. Shingles can lead to skin infections, nerve pain, and hearing or vision problems.

How do you get the virus that causes shingles?

The varicella-zoster virus can spread through direct contact with the blisters or rash of someone who has chickenpox or shingles, or by sharing eating and drinking utensils. The virus can also be transmitted through saliva or sexual contact. Talk with your healthcare providers about testing options to see if you have ever had the varicella-zoster virus. Your healthcare providers can also discuss vaccines to help prevent chickenpox and shingles.

I have shingles. Can it make it harder for me to become pregnant?

Studies have not been done to see if shingles can make it harder to get pregnant.

Does having/getting shingles increase the chance for miscarriage?

Miscarriage can occur in any pregnancy. Studies have not been done to see if having shingles can increase the chance of miscarriage.

Does shingles increase the chance of birth defects?

Every pregnancy starts with a 3-5% chance of having a birth defect. This is called the background risk. Shingles is rare in pregnancy. There are not a lot of studies that look at the effects of shingles on a pregnancy. However, shingles has not been seen to increase the chance of birth defects. If you are pregnant and develop shingles, talk to your healthcare provider about treatment.

Does having/getting shingles increase the chance of pregnancy-related problems?

Studies have not been done to see if having shingles in pregnancy could cause other pregnancy-related problems, such as preterm delivery (birth before week 37) or low birth weight (weighing less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces at birth). However, shingles has not been seen to increase the chance pregnancy complications.

Does having shingles in pregnancy cause long-term problems?

Studies have not been done to see if having shingles in pregnancy could cause long-term problems in the child.

Breastfeeding with shingles:

The virus that causes shingles has not been found in breast milk. It is important to keep the baby from coming into direct contact with the rash or blisters to lower the chances of spreading the virus. If you suspect your baby has any symptoms that could be due to either chickenpox or shingles, contact the child's healthcare provider. Talk with your healthcare provider about all of your breastfeeding questions.

If a male has shingles can it make it harder to get a partner pregnant or increase the chance of birth defects?

There are no studies looking at possible risks to a pregnancy when a male has shingles. A study that tested semen

while the donor had chickenpox did not find any signs of the varicella-zoster virus in semen. In general, exposures that males or sperm donors have are unlikely to increase the risk to a pregnancy. However, if a person is not immune to chickenpox and their intimate partner has shingles, there is a risk of the person who is pregnant to become infected. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet Paternal Exposures at <https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/>.

Please click here for references.

Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at [MotherToBaby.org](https://mothertobaby.org).

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