

Information about Shingles (herpes zoster) Shingrix Vaccine for Cancer Patients receiving treatment

What is shingles?

Shingles (Herpes Zoster) is an infection of a nerve and the skin around it. It's caused by the varicella zoster virus (VZV). The infection can cause pain and you may get a rash or blisters.

VZV is the same virus that causes chicken pox. If you have had chicken pox, the virus can lie dormant (or inactive) in your nerves and reactivate later in life. Reactivation can occur decades after you were first infected with VZV. Usually, the immune system keeps the virus in check but chemotherapy, immunotherapy and radiotherapy can weaken the immune system and as we get older our immunity can decrease.

Why has the vaccine been developed?

The vaccine helps to protect against shingles in older people. It will reduce your chances of developing shingles but if you do get shingles, the symptoms will be milder and not last as long.

There are two vaccines available, Zostavax and Shingrix. Zostavax contains live but weakened virus, whereas Shingrix contains non-live virus. Shingrix is replacing Zostavax in routine use.

Should people who are having chemotherapy, targeted therapy, immunotherapy, or radiotherapy be vaccinated?

Yes. The Department of Health recommends vaccination for people aged 60 – 79 years. You must have the inactivated vaccine (Shingrix).

If you are severely immunocompromised, you can have the Shingrix vaccine if you are over 50 years old, with no upper age limit. This may apply to you if:

You have a diagnosis of acute or chronic leukaemia

You have lymphoma, chronic lymphoid leukaemia or myeloma

You are receiving or have had chemotherapy, radiotherapy or immunotherapy in the past 6 months

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If you have had a stem cell transplant or CAR-T therapy, you may be offered the vaccine if you are over 18 years, please speak to your hospital team.

You should not have the vaccine if you have had an allergic reaction to the chicken pox vaccine.

How many doses of vaccine do I need?

The course consists of two doses of Shingrix®.

Your second dose is usually given eight weeks after the first dose, but can be given up to 12 months after the first.

If you are severely immunocompromised, (see question above) you need to be protected more quickly and therefore the second dose should ideally be given 8 weeks to 6 months after the first dose

If you have had a transplant or CAR-T therapy, please speak to your hospital team

Can the Shingrix vaccination cause shingles?

No. The Shingrix vaccine does not contain any live virus, so cannot cause shingles.

Can I have the Shingrix vaccination at the same time as other vaccines?

Ideally, you should wait seven days between having the Shingrix vaccine and your COVID-19 vaccine. You can have the inactivated flu (influenza) on the same day as your Shingrix vaccine. For other vaccines please check with team administering your vaccines.

Any other questions?

If you have any other questions, please contact your hospital team for advice.

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