

Pain control

Shingles around the eye can be very painful because it is nerve pain (neuralgia). Antiviral tablets will help this, but if you are still in pain after finishing the antiviral tablets your doctor will treat your pain separately. Please tell him or her about your pain as there are many different types of painkilling drugs available. The Help the Aged booklet 'Coping with shingles' gives useful advice so please ask your GP or Practice Nurse for a booklet.

If you are worried about your eye please contact the Eye Unit Acute Referral Clinic on **0300 019 4181** from Mon-Sat 8am-6pm, Sunday 8:30am-2pm and bank holidays 8:30am-6pm.

Herpes Zoster Ophthalmicus (Shingles in the Eye)

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What is it and why have I got it?

After an attack of chickenpox the virus (varicella zoster) remains in the body asleep (dormant). This virus is kept under control by our immune system. However, in 20% of people the virus is reactivated resulting in a painful rash with blisters (shingles) that can affect the body. The most likely cause is a weakening of the immune system with age, most patients are aged over 50 years. Stress, fatigue, other illnesses or medical treatment such as chemotherapy can also cause a weakening of the immune system and possibly shingles.

When the shingles appears around the eye it is called herpes zoster ophthalmicus (HZO) because it affects the ophthalmic nerve. HZO accounts for 10-25% of all cases of shingles.

What are the symptoms?

You may have one or more of these symptoms:

- A tingling or pricking sensation around the one eye, one side of the forehead or head
- Pain or numbness on one side of the head
- General feeling of being unwell with a high temperature

During the early stages you may not have developed a rash but this often appears within the first few days of the illness. You can also get blisters in your hair, on your forehead, your eyelids and even your nose. It is very important to see your doctor as soon as possible and report all your symptoms. The treatment for HZO is antiviral tablets such as aciclovir, famciclovir or valacyclovir. These drugs can shorten the attack of shingles and will usually relieve the pain. However, for these drugs to work, they should be started within two to three days of the rash appearing.

How does HZO affect the eye?

The virus can affect the eye in a number of ways, some minor and some more serious.

- You may get a red eye which is nothing more than a viral conjunctivitis. This usually settles with the antiviral tablets, an antibiotic drop or even just some lubricants
- You may get an inflammation on the cornea (clear surface of the eye). This also usually settles with the same treatment as viral conjunctivitis but sometimes an antiviral ointment, acyclovir (Zovirax) is also given
- On occasions a corneal ulcer develops, this is also treated with the acyclovir ointment
- If the deeper layers of the cornea are involved then a steroid eye drop may be needed
- Some people develop an inflammation inside the eye (iritis or anterior uveitis). In this case steroid eye drops are used and these need to be continued for months as often the inflammation comes back if stopped too soon
- Very rarely inflammation can develop at the back of the eye and this is the most serious as vision can be reduced

The doctor or nurse who examines you will explain how the HZO has affected your eye and will give you treatment and review you if needed. If you need to take steroid eye drops for a long time then you will be reviewed in the Outpatient clinic regularly.

Will it come back?

Viral conjunctivitis doesn't usually come back after the first flare up. If you have inflammation inside the eye this can return, after stopping the steroid eye drops, weeks, months or even years after the original shingles flare up. If your eye becomes red and sore or your vision is affected then you should telephone the Eye Unit and the nurse will advise you or make you another appointment to be seen.