

# New, more effective shingles vaccine offers greater protection

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Close to one-in-three Americans will develop shingles, a rash of itchy blisters similar but more painful than chicken pox. Usually appearing in a swath on the side of the face or torso, shingles feels, as one sufferer described it, like being pressed against a cactus.

A vaccine against shingles has been available for several years, but a new vaccine promises to offer greater protection and significantly limit the suffering from shingles. Approved by the Food and Drug Administration last October, the Shingrix vaccine provides a 90 percent protection rate for older adults, compared with 50 percent for the previously available Zostavax vaccine. And unlike its predecessor, Shingrix can safely be given to those with compromised immune systems.

“The old vaccine is a live vaccine,” says Daniel Z. Uslan, MD, an infectious diseases physician and director of the UCLA Antimicrobial Stewardship Program. “It makes your body immune by exposing it to a live but weakened shingles virus. The new vaccine is an inactivated recombinant vaccine, meaning there is no live virus in it. It’s a much safer vaccine that we can use in patients with weaker immune systems. And those are the people who need the vaccine because they’re most likely to get shingles and have complications from shingles.”

Shingles is caused by the same virus that causes chicken pox. After a person has

chicken pox, usually as a child, the virus remains dormant in the nerves. With age, stress or a weakening immune system, the virus can reactivate, producing a similar rash that can cause extreme pain. About 20 percent of people who get shingles — the majority of them elderly — will suffer from a complication called postherpetic neuralgia, where the pain continues for months or years after the skin rash clears. Shingles on the face and head can also cause damage to the eyes, ears and brain. And even in people who suffer minimal discomfort from shingles, the virus is highly contagious.

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405 Hilgard Avenue  
Box 956923  
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DIRECTOR,  
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DESIGN  
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For inquiries about *Vital Signs*, contact  
UCLA Health  
Marketing Communications, Box 956923  
Los Angeles, CA 90095-6923  
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