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HEALTH

7 Things You Should Avoid Doing When You Have Shingles

These common missteps can make a painful situation worse.

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If you feel like you've been hearing about shingles a lot lately, you're not wrong. From [Reddit threads](#) to news about [recent research](#), one thing is clear: What was once seen as a condition that mainly affected older adults is increasingly impacting [young adults](#). Yet younger people may be more likely to [brush off shingles symptoms](#) as NBD and have less awareness of what the illness actually is.

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1. Trying out shingles on your own

If you at all suspect that you might have shingles, get checked by a doctor right away—don't wait it out for a few days or try to treat the rash on your own. This is especially critical if you have a rash anywhere near your eyes, on your forehead, or on your nose. When shingles appears in those places, it can travel along a nerve pathway that leads to your eyes, potentially affecting your vision. There are treatments that can help speed healing and prevent complications in your eyes, as well as wherever else the rash has cropped up, but you need to act quickly.

“Antiviral medications are most effective when started within 72 hours of rash onset and can help shorten the duration, reduce severity, and lower the risk of complications, such as long-term nerve pain called postherpetic neuralgia,” says Andrew Truong, MD, an assistant professor of dermatology at Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons. “Delaying treatment can lead to worse outcomes and prolonged discomfort,” Dr. Truong adds. A doctor can also prescribe medications to help manage shingles-related pain.

2. Scratching your skin

Just like when you have chickenpox, picking at shingles lesions is a big no-no. It can be difficult to resist scratching when your skin feels intensely itchy, but doing so can lead to a secondary infection by breaking the skin and allowing bacteria like staph to enter. Scratching and picking can also delay healing and cause scarring or permanent discoloration of the skin. When you feel the urge to itch, apply a cool compress instead.

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When you have shingles it's important to exercise caution before heading into the office or attending a group gathering. If you have active blisters, you should especially avoid close contact with pregnant individuals, infants, and immunocompromised people, such as cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy. "The varicella-zoster virus can be quite severe and cause significant neurological disease in a growing fetus and in those populations of individuals whose immune systems are not at their strongest," says [Donna Adams-Pickett, MD, PhD](#), founder of the Augusta Women's Health & Wellness Center in Georgia.

You should also steer clear of anyone you know has never had chickenpox or gotten the chickenpox or [shingles vaccines](#). As a best practice when you're around others, [keep your rash covered](#) with a thin layer of petroleum jelly and a sterile, nonstick bandage, and wash your hands well to limit the chances that you'll transmit the virus. "The moist sores are an active petri dish of growing virus," Dr. Adams-Pickett says.

4. Sticking to your exercise routine

This is not the moment for HIIT workouts or hot yoga. "Gentle activity may be fine if the person feels well enough, but strenuous, sweaty exercise is not ideal because heat, sweat, friction, and tight clothing can make an already painful rash feel worse," says [Seth Cohen, MD](#), the medical director of infection prevention at the University of Washington Medical Center. If you are craving a light workout, don't make it communal. "Working out in public places during a shingles outbreak can result in virus-containing droplets being spread onto gym equipment and surfaces," Dr. Adams-Pickett says. Swimming in public pools poses similar risks, since droplets can spread through water. To add some movement to your day-to-day, consider walking, light stretching, or even active chores like gardening.

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moisturizers can delay that process,” says Dr. Adams-Pickett. “Additionally, some have fragrances that can irritate the rash further.” Antibiotic ointments can similarly slow healing, so you’re better off skipping these as well (unless your doctor prescribes one to treat a secondary infection). Even some common over-the-counter rash soothers, like hydrocortisone cream, are a bad idea. “Use of topical steroids for itch can suppress the skin’s immune system and allow the virus to spread further,” says [Debbie Palmer, MD](#), a dermatologist in Westchester County, New York. The best approach is to just keep your skin clean and dry until the blisters scab over; if needed, calamine lotion is a safe option.

6. Taking hot showers

A steamy shower might feel great, but the aftermath probably won’t. “Hot showers can further irritate shingles blisters and increase the sensation of itching, pain, or burning,” says Dr. Palmer. That said, bathing regularly with a gentle, fragrance-free cleanser can be helpful. ([Dove Sensitive Skin Beauty Bar](#) and [Vanicream Gentle Body Wash](#) both fit the bill.)

“Keeping the affected skin clean could limit the possibility of developing a secondary bacterial infection,” says [Sabrina Assoumou, MD](#), an infectious diseases physician at Boston Medical Center and associate professor at Boston University. Just stick to lukewarm showers or try cool [colloidal oatmeal baths](#), which can help relieve stress while soothing discomfort and itch.

7. Stressing about your diet

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