

## Shield yourself from shingles

### Changes to the shingles program – answers to commonly asked questions

The shingles vaccine Shingrix has replaced Zostavax on the National Immunisation Program (NIP) for eligible people.

#### What is shingles?

Shingles is a viral infection that causes a painful blistering rash. It is caused by reactivation of the same virus that causes chickenpox. While most symptoms typically last 2-3 weeks, shingles can become serious. It can lead to nerve pain that can last for months (called post-herpetic neuralgia or PHN). Other serious complications include pneumonia, hearing problems, blindness and swelling of the brain.

About 1 in 3 people will get shingles in their lifetime. Shingles usually affects older people, and the risk of complications increases with age, particularly for:

- those over the age of 65
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 50 and over
- some people with weakened immune systems.

#### Who can get the free vaccine?

A 2-dose course of Shingrix will be available free for:

- people aged 65 years and over
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 50 years and over, and
- immunocompromised people aged 18 years and over with the following medical conditions:
  - haemopoietic stem cell transplant
  - solid organ transplant
  - haematological malignancy (blood cancer)
  - advanced or untreated HIV.

#### Can I get the Shingrix vaccine if I have already had Zostavax?

Yes, but there are some conditions:

People who have already received a free Zostavax shingles vaccine can't get a free Shingrix vaccine for at least 5 years after they have had Zostavax.

People who have already received Zostavax vaccine privately can receive Shingrix free under the program if they are eligible. An interval of at least 12 months is recommended between receiving Zostavax and a subsequent dose of Shingrix. A 2-dose schedule of Shingrix will still need to be completed.

### **How many vaccine doses do I need?**

Two doses of the Shingrix vaccine are recommended and free under the NIP for eligible people. It is important to receive both doses for the best protection. For most people, the two doses of Shingrix vaccine are given 2 to 6 months apart. For people with weakened immune systems, the two doses are given 1 to 2 months apart.

### **How and where can I get the free shingles vaccine?**

Check with your vaccination provider if you can get a free shingles vaccine. The vaccine and eligibility will change from 1 November 2023.

While the vaccine is free under the NIP for eligible people, your vaccination provider may charge a consultation fee for the visit. Check if there are any fees when making your appointment.

You can book a vaccine appointment at a range of health services including:

- local doctor/general practices
- local council immunisation clinics (available in some states and territories)
- community health centres (available in some states and territories)
- Aboriginal health services
- participating pharmacies.

Not all these vaccination providers will have the free NIP vaccines so it's best to call ahead and check.

If you are not eligible to receive the free Shingrix vaccine under the NIP, talk to your doctor about your needs and whether you can buy it privately. You may need a prescription. Talk to your local vaccination provider to find out how much it will cost.

### **Do I still need to get vaccinated if I've already had shingles?**

Vaccination is still recommended for those who have had shingles infection in the past. However, you should wait at least 12 months between an episode of shingles and having the vaccine. Discuss this with your doctor or other vaccination provider.

As the risk of further infection is higher in immunocompromised people, Shingrix can be given from 3 months after illness.

### **I've already paid for Shingrix privately. Can I get reimbursed?**

If you're eligible for free vaccination from 1 November 2023, you can't be reimbursed for any privately purchased Shingrix doses.

Eligible people who have received one dose of Shingrix vaccine privately can receive their second dose free from 1 November 2023.

### **Is the shingles vaccine safe and effective?**

Yes. The shingles vaccine is safe and very good at preventing shingles and stopping bad side effects from the virus that causes shingles.

The shingles vaccine doesn't contain any live virus and is safe for adults with weakened immune systems.

### **Are there any side effects from the vaccine?**

Shingrix creates a strong defence against shingles and can cause temporary side effects. These can include pain where the needle went in, redness and swelling, tiredness, muscle aches, headaches, fever and gastrointestinal symptoms. These reactions are generally mild and disappear in a few days.

Shingrix can be given at the same time as other 'inactivated' vaccines such as tetanus-containing vaccines, pneumococcal vaccines, flu vaccines and COVID-19 vaccines. However, it is best to have it by itself, if possible, to reduce the risk of mild to moderate side effects. Talk to your doctor or other vaccination provider for advice.

### **Where can I get more information?**

Visit [health.gov.au/shingles-vaccine](https://health.gov.au/shingles-vaccine) or contact your local state or territory health department.