

Welcome to Today's Medical Education Program!

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- The information presented throughout the program will be consistent with FDA guidelines.



CAROLINE DORSEN'S INSIGHTS ON ZOSTER

Herpes zoster, or shingles, is a potentially serious disease that can be formidable. Although health care professionals are increasingly aware that zoster can be serious and sometimes complicated, our focus on chronic disease management can put zoster low on our priorities. There's also a perception among patients that shingles is always going to be one of those things that can be a temporary bother, but goes away.

Although for most people the pain associated with zoster lessens as the rash heals—something that usually occurs in 2 to 4 weeks—some zoster patients may also develop potentially serious complications, including a chronic pain syndrome called postherpetic neuralgia. My patients often describe the pain of acute zoster and postherpetic neuralgia as “horrible” or “excruciating.”

Zoster can be difficult both to diagnose and to treat. One patient in my practice had an outbreak on her face that was not initially diagnosed as zoster. By the time we saw her, she had ocular involvement that could have resulted in a loss of vision. And, as a nurse practitioner in primary care, I can feel helpless when my patients develop zoster or its complications because there's no one-cure-fits-all treatment. If you see a patient early enough, you can start treatment right away, but oral pain medications, topical treatments, and other classes of drugs may still leave some people with significant pain.

As more people develop zoster, I've noticed my patients have become increasingly cognizant of it. My own grandmother recently asked me about zoster because she knew someone who had the disease. As our population ages, the proportion of patients in my practice over 60 has increased as well.

Even with the demands on our time in primary care, it's incumbent on us to discuss the risks of zoster, particularly with patients aged 60 and older because they are at increased risk for this disease.