Shingles More Likely to Develop in People With Cancer

But new vaccines hold promise for prevention.

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Nearly one in three people in the United States will develop shingles, or herpes zoster, in their lifetime. Now, a new study published in The Journal of Infectious Diseases reveals that people with cancer are at greater risk of developing this painful condition, reports the Infectious Disease Society of America (IDSA).

Shingles is caused by the varicella zoster virus, which also causes chickenpox.

The large prospective study examined the risk of shingles before and after a cancer diagnosis and across a range of cancer types among more than 240,000 adults in Australia between 2006 and 2015.

A cancer diagnosis of any kind was linked to a nearly 40 percent increase in risk for shingles compared with the risk of someone without cancer. What's more, people who had a blood-related cancer diagnosis were three times more likely to develop shingles than those without the disease.

The risk for shingles was 30 percent higher in those with solid organ cancers, such as cancer located in the lung, breast, prostate or other organ, compared with someone without cancer.

Researchers also found that increases in zoster risk for people with blood cancer was apparent two years before diagnosis. But a higher risk of developing shingles for those with solid tumors was largely associated with chemotherapy treatment following diagnosis.

"These findings have important implications in view of recent advances in development of zoster vaccines," said Kosuke Kawai, ScD, of Boston Children's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, and Barbara P. Yawn, MD, MsC, of the University of Minnesota, two experts not involved in the study.

In 2017, a new vaccine for shingles was approved for use in the United States.

The recombinant vaccine is reported to be safe and immunogenic in people with compromised immune systems, such as those on chemotherapy. But it has not yet been recommended for these patients.

Another vaccine, which uses an inactivated form of the virus, is being developed.

Click here to learn about the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine approved for women and men up to age 45.

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