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## Shingles victim urges preventive shots

By Shelley Shelton arizona daily star

Jan 30, 2007

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**P**arts of Ruthie Steinberg's face are still so sensitive, it hurts to touch them.

When she bumps her head, the pain goes right through her, she said.

She has lost almost 20 pounds since the beginning of May. She has even lost some of her hair.

The 81-year-old Foothills resident is suffering from post-herpetic neuralgia, which is, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a severe pain that stays with about one in five people who have been stricken with shingles.

"Most people don't get it like this," Steinberg said.

She first experienced symptoms of shingles last spring.

"My whole head, it was just like somebody was pounding nails into it."

Shingles is a painful skin rash caused by the same virus that causes chickenpox.

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In fact, the only people who are susceptible to shingles are those who have had chickenpox or the chickenpox vaccine because the virus stays in your body once you get it, according to the CDC.

It's generally brought on by severe stress, and although Steinberg describes herself as someone who doesn't get stressed easily, a preponderance of family events last spring pushed her to her limits, she said.

Mildred Blackstone, special programs manager for the Arizona Department of Health Services, wrote a description of shingles — also known as herpes zoster — describing it as "a painful skin rash, often with blisters which develop on one side of the body and can cause severe pain lasting for weeks or in some cases years."

She went on to describe a vaccine study that led to the Food and Drug Administration approving a vaccine at the end of May last year — too late for Steinberg, but not for her husband, Stanley, who was vaccinated about four weeks ago.

The vaccine is recommended for people 60 and older, and Steinberg said she has made it her mission to tell all the senior citizens she knows.

"I've been telling everybody I can possibly reach, 'Please get it. It's worth every penny,' " she said.

Cost is a possible deterrent for some people on fixed incomes. The Steinbergs said their friend paid more than \$200 for a vaccine, but another friend with insurance paid less than \$100.

The Steinbergs paid out of pocket, upfront, and are still waiting to see how much their health plan will reimburse.

"It's not cheap," Steinberg said. "However, with my experience, before Stanley got the shot I would say, 'I don't care if it's \$1,000. I'll beg, borrow, steal.' It's that painful."

Blackstone said that when a vaccine is new, it's pretty common to have difficulty finding insurance coverage for it.

In her write-up, she wrote that in a study of 38,000 people older than 60 where half received the vaccine and half received a placebo, the vaccine reduced the occurrence of shingles by about 50 percent. Post-herpetic-neuralgia occurrence — the pain still afflicting Steinberg — was reduced by 67 percent.

But the vaccine's ability to prevent shingles declined with age, she wrote.

Stanley Steinberg, who said he's not sure whether he had chickenpox but assumes he did, said he would have gotten the vaccine whether or not his wife had been suffering for most of the past year.

He was never too worried about his wife because he knew she wasn't terminal, he said.

But he did lose weight along with her when she was unable to cook or eat because she was in so much pain.

Ruthie Steinberg says the condition itself wasn't terminal, but her quality of life was so diminished that she wouldn't be surprised to find out that at some point someone in her condition has committed suicide just to escape the pain she's felt.

"It could have been terminal if I had been another person."

Foothills

## **drawbacks**

People should NOT get the shingles vaccine if they:

- Have ever had life-threatening allergic reactions to gelatin, the antibiotic neomycin or any other component of the shingles vaccine.
- Have a weakened immune system because of HIV/AIDS or another disease that affects the immune system.
- Are undergoing treatment with drugs that affect the immune system, such as steroids, radiation or chemotherapy.
- Have a history of cancer affecting the bone marrow or lymphatic system, such as leukemia or lymphoma.
- Have active, untreated tuberculosis.

— Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

- Send story ideas about people or happenings in the Foothills or Tanque Verde Valley to Shelley Shelton at [sshelton@azstarnet.com](mailto:sshelton@azstarnet.com) or call her at 434-4078.