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Early Treatment Reduces Herpes Zoster Complications, Says IPN Expert

- **According to Jesús Miguel Torres, a researcher at the ENCB, the Varicella-zoster virus remains dormant in the nervous system after causing chickenpox and may reactivate years later when the immune system is weakened.**
- **Older adults, individuals with weakened immune systems, and those who are immunocompromised are at a higher risk.**

Jesús Miguel Torres Flores, a researcher at the Escuela Nacional de Ciencias Biológicas (ENCB) of the Instituto Politécnico Nacional (IPN), explained that the Varicella-zoster virus, which causes chickenpox during childhood, remains latent in certain nerves of the body. Over time, it can reactivate when the immune system is weakened—a condition that can occur at any age but is more common in people over 60, those under chronic stress, or individuals with illnesses or treatments that compromise immune function.

Torres Flores, who also serves as the Biosafety Officer at the National Laboratory of Vaccinology and Tropical Viruses (LNVyVT) at ENCB, emphasized that shingles is a viral disease and therefore cannot be treated with antibiotics. The most effective course of action, he said, is to seek medical attention for a proper diagnosis and to receive antiviral treatment based on the clinical presentation.

Early intervention can shorten the duration of shingles and reduce the risk of complications, noted the Level I member of Mexico's National System of Researchers (SNII).

He clarified that shingles can occur in adults who have chickenpox during childhood. A person with shingles can transmit the varicella-zoster virus (the cause of chickenpox, not shingles itself) to individuals who have never had the disease.

Chickenpox spreads through direct contact with skin lesions or via aerosolized droplets from nasopharyngeal secretions. Transmission can occur 24 to 48 hours before the rash appears and up to four or five days after, during the pustular phase.

The first symptoms of shingles, according to the IPN researcher, include tingling, itching, and burning sensations in the areas where lesions will later appear. These typically manifest as a band of fluid-filled blisters, ranging from a few to many clustered across large areas of skin, often accompanied by severe pain.

As with chickenpox, the blisters eventually dry up and form scabs, which disappear over time. However, many patients experience lingering nerve sensitivity—known as postherpetic neuralgia—long after the lesions have healed.

He stressed that patients recovering from shingles may continue to suffer from a burning, sharp pain after the visible symptoms have resolved.

This condition is caused by nerve damage from the blisters and can significantly impact the quality of life, especially among older adults or those with compromised immunity or high-stress levels. The pain may be constant or intermittent, affecting the sensory nerves responsible for detecting pain and temperature. In severe cases, it can be debilitating.

Chickenpox can be prevented through vaccination. The first dose is administered between 12 and 15 months of age, followed by a booster between ages 4 and 6. There is also a vaccine available to prevent shingles, recommended for individuals over 50, which can help reduce the risk of developing the disease later in life.

For more information, visit www.ipn.mx

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