

A MOVING EXPERIENCE: SHINGLE WELL SHOCK



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I was living in Italy when a friend stateside uttered the word “shingles.” Shingles? Wasn’t that something from an 19thth century Dickensonian novel? So old-fashioned: surely no one got shingles in this day and age.

Except that my friend *had* gotten it, twice, and emphasized how unpleasant it was. It’s like chicken pox on steroids, an infuriatingly itchy and ugly rash, and can pop up at any time in people who have had chicken pox as children. That includes 99% of Americans born before 1980. The upshot is that one-third of all Americans today will develop shingles in their lifetime. The effects are worse the older you get. Nobody dies from it but 10% to 18% of patients suffer debilitating pain that can last for years. A few unfortunates whose rash emerges near the eyes can go blind.

A vaccine (actually two different vaccines) is/are available to prevent shingles, but my friend hadn’t bothered for the classic reason—she didn’t think it would happen to her.

The older vaccine, administered in one dose, is called Zostavax. In Italy, specifically in Lombardia where I lived, it is available free to everyone over the age of 65 and those with immune deficiencies. Younger people and those not deemed vulnerable pay 195,90 euro for the vaccine. Other regions of Italy have different policies and different cost structures.

Zostavax has not been used in the US since November 2020, having been largely replaced by Shingrix, which became available stateside in 2017. It was approved for use in Europe in 2020. This newer and far more effective vaccine is administered in two doses from two to six months apart.

Why hadn't my doctor in Italy mentioned all this to me? She had always urged me to get my flu shot, offered free every year by the Italian health service, so why not this? Maybe shingles was an American problem? I asked my Italian-born husband if he had ever heard of it.

"Shingles? No, what is that?" I looked up the Italian translation: *fuoco di Sant' Antonio*. "Oh YES, I had that when I was in my 20s. Geez, it itched so much."

For reasons that researchers are trying to understand, the incidence of shingles has been increasing both in Europe and the US over the last 70 years. Studies from the US Center for Disease Control (CDC) suggest that the incidence of shingles has quadrupled in the US during this period. Studies in Europe report similar findings.

So, after moving stateside in mid-2021 and struggling to familiarize myself with the intricacies of American so-called health care, I came across a list of vaccines supposedly covered by Medicare and Shingrix was one of them. With my friend's experience fresh in my mind, I asked my local pharmacy about it.

"Yes, it is covered by Medicare. It will cost you \$203 . . . per shot. There are two of them in all and then you are covered for life."

"But why must I pay if Medicare covers the shot?"

"Maybe it is fully covered if your doctor administers the injection. Here you have to pay \$203."

I asked my primary care physician about giving me the shot in her office. My cost would still be \$203 in 2022 because I hadn't reached my Medicare deductible. So much for government "coverage." But as of January 1, 2023, Medicare decided that Shingrix would be available free to its enrollees from the get-go. I signed up immediately and took the plunge (actually the needle did the plunging) a week ago.

The nurse who administered it cautioned that my arm might be sore, and that she personally had suffered some fatigue, nausea, headache, and chills after her second shot. It had been unpleasant, she said, but nothing compared to shingles itself and she would do it again in a heartbeat.

All I felt was a sore arm for a couple of days. Fortunately, no fatigue, nausea, or any other side effect. Remains to be seen whether the second shot will be as easy, but I don't have to think about that for four months. During which time I can ponder the incongruity of the US health care non-system being actually more advanced and equitable than its normally far-superior Italian counterpart in this *one* case for this *one* curious ailment. The Old Curiosity Shot?

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