

Canadian Dermatology Association Pharmacy & Therapeutics Committee Position Statement on the Herpes Zoster Vaccine

The herpes zoster infection is a painful blistering eruption usually affecting a single dermatome, and arises from the reactivation of latent Varicella Zoster Virus (VZV) in sensory ganglia as a result of a previous chickenpox infection. The most frequent complication is post-herpetic neuralgia (PHN), which typically has a major adverse impact on quality of life, especially in elderly persons. It is characterized by prolonged (usually > 90 days) often debilitating, neurogenic pain following the acute zoster infection. This complication occurs in approximately 20% all adults, but at in least one-third of octogenarians. Treatment options are of limited effectiveness. Other complications of acute zoster are potentially include sight threatening eye infections, central nervous system infection, nerve palsies including the Ramsay-Hunt Syndrome, neuromuscular disease including Guillain-Barre Syndrome, and secondary bacterial infections.

A vaccine that may limit the occurrence of herpes zoster is currently available in Canada. It is a live attenuated vaccine that is indicated for the prevention of herpes zoster in adults over the age of 50 years. In the pivotal efficacy trial, the vaccine reduced the incidence of Herpes Zoster by 51.3% in the study population of 38,546 adults greater than 60 years of age. In addition the incidence of post-herpetic neuralgia was significantly reduced by 66.5%. As subsequent study in 22,439 subjects 50-60 years of age the vaccine demonstrated a 69.8% reduction in Herpes Zoster and 73% less zoster-associated pain in this population.

This vaccine is mercury (thimerosal) free. Because it is a live attenuated virus, it should be avoided by immunocompromised individuals or those taking immune modifying medications ("biologics"). While studies showed no increase in serious adverse events have been reported as compared with placebo with this vaccine, local injection site reactions shortly after receiving the vaccine (including chicken-pox like rashes around the injection site) and have been reported. While there have been no reports anyone getting chickenpox from a person who has received this vaccine, if reactions do occur, it is recommended to cover them up until they resolve.

It is recommended that you discuss with your primary physician or your dermatologist whether the Herpes Zoster vaccine is right for you.