Shingles and Postherpetic Neuralgia

Shingles consists of a very painful rash that most often appears on one side of the body in a narrow band. Shingles usually affects the elderly or people with compromised immune systems. The same virus (varicella zoster) that causes chicken pox also causes shingles. Nerve pain that persists after the rash has cleared is called postherpetic neuralgia.

Nutritional supplements that may be helpful:
Some doctors have observed that intramuscular injections of vitamin B12 appear to relieve the symptoms of postherpetic neuralgia.[1, 2] However, since these studies did not include a control group, the possibility of a placebo effect cannot be ruled out. Oral vitamin B12 supplements have not been tested, but they are not likely to be effective against postherpetic neuralgia.

Some doctors have found vitamin E to be effective for individuals with postherpetic neuralgia—even people who have had the problem for many years.[3, 4] The recommended amount of vitamin E by mouth is 1,200–1,600 IU per day. In addition, vitamin E at a concentration of 30 IU per gram can be applied to the skin. Several months of continuous vitamin E use may be needed in order to see an improvement. Not all studies have found a beneficial effect of vitamin E.[5] However, in the study that produced negative results, vitamin E may not have been used for a long enough period of time.

Adenosine monophosphate (AMP), a compound that occurs naturally in the body, has been found to be effective against shingles outbreaks. In one double blind study, thirty-two individuals with an outbreak of herpes zoster were given either 100 mg of AMP intramuscularly three times a week or a placebo for four weeks. Compared with the placebo, AMP promoted faster healing and reduced the duration of pain.[6] Most important, AMP appeared to prevent the development of postherpetic neuralgia, a chronic, painful, and difficult-to-treat condition that often follows an episode of shingles.[7, 8]

Are there any side effects or interactions?
Refer to the individual supplement for information about any side effects or interactions.

Herbs that may be helpful:
The hot principle in cayenne peppers, known as capsaicin, is used for many painful conditions, including shingles and postherpetic neuralgia. In a double blind trial, a cream containing 0.075% capsaicin, applied three to four times per day to the painful area, greatly reduced pain.[9] In another study, a lower concentration of capsaicin (0.025%) was also effective.[10] Two or more weeks of treatment may be required to get the full benefit of the cream.

Licorice has also been used by doctors of natural medicine as a topical agent for shingles and postherpetic neuralgia; however, no clinical trials support its use for this purpose. Glycyrrhizin, one of the active components of licorice, has been
shown to block the replication of varicella zoster, the virus that causes shingles.[11] Licorice gel is usually applied three or more times per day. Licorice gel is not widely available, but may be obtained through a doctor who practices herbal medicine.

Are there any side effects or interactions?
Refer to the individual herb for information about any side effects or interactions.

References:

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