Tame the Pain (and the itch)

Along with any medications your doctor prescribes, try these complementary shingles remedies and preventives.

April 1, 2009 By Bill Strubbe

DURING AN OUTBREAK (WHILE BLISTERS ARE OPEN)

Even if you're not in serious pain, get plenty of rest and avoid strenuous activities while recuperating.

Don't risk further infection by scratching the blisters. Keep them clean and dry to prevent a bacterial infection.

Apply cool compresses (cup vinegar to 1 cup water) to the blisters three times daily to relieve the pain and itch. Or your doctor can prescribe lidocaine patches.

AFTER BLISTERS HAVE SCABBED OVER

To relieve itching:

Take a cool bath infused with baking soda, uncooked oatmeal or colloidal oatmeal such as Aveeno.

Smear on lidocaine or a nonprescription anti-inflammatory cream containing at least 1 percent hydrocortisone.

Try a nonprescription oral antihistamine, such as diphenhydramine (Benadryl).

To ease post-outbreak pain:

Apply capsaicin cream (apply two to four times a day, using gloves; avoid touching your eyes). It depletes substance P—a neurochemical that transmits pain—producing an analgesic effect. The benefit may take several weeks to develop.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

Two amino acids in food affect herpes viruses: L-arginine promotes herpes replication, L-lysine quells it. Eating foods higher in lysine than arginine, such as lamb, fish, beans and unskinned potatoes, may help prevent or ease shingles outbreaks. Conversely, avoid seeds, peanuts and chocolate, all arginine-rich.

Shingles outbreaks are more likely and more dangerous when CD4 counts are low, so taking your HIV meds as prescribed may keep herpes at bay.

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