Shingles Scene

October 1, 2001 By Tim Murphy

HAART side effect no. 237 -- drum roll, please! -- let's give a warm welcome to...shingles. In a June *American Journal of Medicine* study, researchers at a Barcelona hospital found that 24 of 316 HIVers (8 percent) on a cocktail of two NRTIs and one or more protease inhibitor developed, within their first four months of pill-popping, nasty nerve-burning outbreaks of shingles, a.k.a. the herpes-zoster virus (*not* herpes simplex, the genital or cold-sore variety).

Why did these unlucky 24 get itchy, painful shingles? Researchers can only speculate, although they have identified what might be a specific pre-breakout signal: a dramatic boost in CD8 cells, which the shingles group had in spades, compared with those *sans* shingles. According to Pere Domingo, MD, a principal investigator in the study, "A sudden increase in CD8 cells may prompt a defensive response in the immune system that the individual was not able to mount." In other words, the herpes outbreak, however hellish, may be a sign that a rebooted immune system is up and doing its job once again. Hey, thanks!

John Mazzullo, MD, of New England Medical Center agrees, noting that these shingles flare-ups jibe with the occasional, though seemingly inappropriate, appearance of CMV, MAC and other infections in HIVers whose HAART-powered immune systems have started fighting back: "A profoundly immune-deficient person can't mount an appropriate immune response to viral infections like shingles, but often after starting HAART, a disease will appear -- the result of the body trying to rid itself of the pathogen."

Larger studies would be needed to discover why some HAART-HIVers get shingles -- and how to prevent them -- though it may be premature to start phone-zapping Pharma. A handful of the nation's leading HIV docs told *POZ* that they've seen little incidence of shingles among new HAARTers. Boston doc Cal Cohen, MD, research director at the Community Research Initiative New England, says the study's shingles-CD8 link "may be a good one, but shingles might not follow a CD8 jump often enough to justify changing therapy. One option would be to start [an antiviral like] acyclovir as a preventive."

Too bad this tip came too late for the Barcelona HIVers, who'd gladly have traded their shingles for vinyl siding.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Shingles-Scene-1269-6643