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CONTACT: Leslie Kinnee

989-831-3669, kinnee@mmdhd.org

Mid-Michigan District Health Department

615 N. State St., Stanton, MI 48888-9702, www.mmdhd.org

MMDHD to offer Shingles vaccine

STANTON~ Mid-Michigan District Health Department (MMDHD) is pleased to announce that it has received a limited quantity of vaccine to prevent shingles, which will be offered to uninsured individuals ages 60-64 in Clinton, Gratiot and Montcalm Counties.

Shingles is a reactivation of the chicken pox virus that develops along a nerve fiber and causes severe inflammation of the nerve as well as blistering of the skin. The chickenpox virus goes to sleep in a person's spinal cord after the body fights off chickenpox. Then, usually during adulthood, the chickenpox virus begins to grow and moves down a single nerve fiber and causes the nerve to send pain signals to the brain.

Shingles usually starts on one side of the face or body in the form of a rash that blisters and scabs after three to five days and clears within two to four weeks. Before the rash develops, there is often pain, itching, or tingling in the area where the rash will appear. Other symptoms of shingles can include fever, headache, chills and upset stomach.

"Shingles is the most painful disease I have ever treated," said Dr. Robert Graham, Medical Director for MMDHD. "Some cases were so bad the patient needed strong narcotics for pain relief," Graham added.

The risk of getting shingles increases as a person ages and most commonly occurs in those 55 years old and older. Ruth, age 73 from Lakeview, is one of the estimated 1 million people in the U.S. each year to contract the disease. "I had no idea I had shingles. The area by my eye was swollen one morning, but I'd been working in the yard and assumed I'd been bitten by a bug. I then began to experience slight pains in my head but didn't go to my doctor until two weeks later when the blisters formed. My doctor put me on a very strong antibiotic and referred me to my ophthalmologist who prescribed eye drops."

Most commonly, a person experiences only one episode of shingles, but rare subsequent episodes may occur, as in Ruth's case. "I had shingles for the first time 10 years ago," said Ruth. "I certainly never thought I'd get it again."

"Up until a year ago there was no way to prevent someone from getting shingles," Graham noted. "In studies, the vaccine reduced the incidence of shingles by 50 percent. Even in people who got the disease, most who were vaccinated experienced far less pain."

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“People age 60 and older, including those who have had a previous episode of shingles, are recommended to receive this vaccine (trade name Zostavax), which was introduced last year,” said Graham. The vaccine is the same as the childhood vaccine against chickenpox but contains 15 times the amount of medicine. “The adult immune system needs a bigger kick in the pants to respond to a vaccine than children do,” Dr. Graham said, “as we age the immune system gets sluggish. That’s why the Zostavax vaccine has more medicine in it.”

Those who can receive the Zostavax vaccine at the health department must meet the following criteria, per federal government restrictions:

- Be between 60 and 64 years of age and their insurance does not pay for Zostavax. (Zostavax is only licensed for people over 60) **OR**
- People with Medicare but do not have any Part D coverage **OR**
- People with Medicare but whose Part D coverage does not include Zostavax as a benefit
- There is a \$15 administration charge to receive the shingles vaccine. The vaccine itself has been provided to the health department free of charge, but the health department must charge for the cost of administering the vaccine.

Due to federal restrictions we will not and cannot give Zostavax to people with insurance that covers the cost of the vaccine. People with Medicare Part D insurance that covers Zostavax must go to their doctor to receive the vaccine.

If you are without insurance and between the ages of 60-64 you may contact MMDHD to make an appointment to receive your free shingles vaccine

Montcalm County: 989-831-5237

Gratiot County: 989-875-3681

Clinton County: 989-224-2195

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