

Despite contracting disease, woman recommends shingles vaccine

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SPECIAL TO THE DAILY NEWS



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Sally Chester of New Horizons Service Dogs, Inc. is training Buffet to be a service dog. Chester, who contracted shingles despite getting vaccinated, still recommends receiving the vaccine to ward off the painful disease.

Sally Chester has had plenty to deal with in her life.

The registered nurse is now the primary caregiver for her husband, Don, who is confined to a wheelchair since a jogging accident in 2004 left him without the use of his legs. Always an active member of the community, Don has returned to work at St. Mary's Medical Center, but Sally is always there when he needs her.

Recently, she had to pull back a bit. She was diagnosed with shingles in her eye in May, despite having been vaccinated against it. Shingles is caused by the varicella-zoster virus, the same virus

that causes chickenpox. In fact, you can only get shingles if you've had chicken pox; it's a reawakening of the virus that apparently lies dormant in your body. There is no answer as to why it returns in this painful, itching form.

There was a big breakthrough in 2006, however, when the Food and Drug Administration approved the first vaccine to prevent shingles in people 60 and older. A few months ago, approval came for people 50 and older to be vaccinated with Zostavax, the live attenuated virus vaccine that has now been available through family doctors for nearly five years.

But it's not a sure thing.

Researchers found that, overall, in those ages 60 and above the vaccine reduced the occurrence of shingles by about half. In addition to preventing about half of the cases, the duration of pain following the onset of shingles was slightly reduced in people who developed the disease despite being vaccinated with Zostavax.

Even with the vaccine, Chester suffered mightily. She couldn't believe she had shingles because of having taken precautions against it.

"I kind of laid in bed. I could hardly form sentences," she says. "I was in such pain. I felt like people were putting cigarettes out on my scalp and head; like my head was caught in a claw."

As we spoke, a golden retriever sprawled at her feet. In addition to everything else, Chester is chairman of the board of New Horizon Service Dogs, which holds a yearly fundraiser in Palm Beach. The Chesters became acquainted with the organization when Don got Pollyanna, a service dog trained to help those with mobility issues. Sally now is a "puppy raiser" who helps the dogs get socialized.

To fight her pain, Sally underwent various treatments, from nerve blocks to pills, but she was still surprised that the shingles had occurred.

"I wasn't having any particularly stressful point in my life," she said. There are theories that it is brought on by stress that weakens the immune system.

Despite the treatments, she says, "The pain has lasted. It gets worse when I'm tired. My head turns red," she explained. Actually, the pain can last for months, or even years. It is even possible to develop a post-herpetic neuralgia, a pain that, some say, can last a lifetime. She has been told to expect to have this pain for up to a year.

The only positive outcome, she says with a smile, is that she lost 20 pounds because she was in too much pain to eat. And she has to hold her hair back with headbands, since it hurts to have it touch her forehead.

Fortunately, her vision seems not to have been adversely affected.

But, guess what? She still recommends the vaccine to anyone who asks.

"It works in 50 percent of the cases," she reminds everyone, "and that's a good deal if you don't have to go through this excruciating pain."