Post-herpetic neuralgia was not frequent or severe after a first episode of herpes zoster


QUESTION: In patients with a first episode of herpes zoster, what is the clinical course of the disease and the duration of pain?

Design
Inception cohort followed up for 12 months.

Setting
Catchment area of 100 000 people for 62 general practitioners in Iceland.

Patients
421 patients (mean age 42 y, 56% women)* who had a first episode of herpes zoster. Patients with a history of zoster were excluded. Follow up was complete at 1 year.

Assessment of prognostic factors
Sex and age.

Main outcome measures
Severity and duration of pain and prevalence of post-herpetic neuralgia.

Main results
Sex was not a predictor of post-herpetic neuralgia at any point during follow up. Age was a predictor of pain severity and duration. The odds ratio for pain per 10 years of age difference was 1.87 (95% CI 1.56 to 2.23) after 1 month, 2.11 (CI 1.56 to 2.84) after 3 months, and 2.35 (CI 1.48 to 3.69) after 12 months. In patients < 60 years of age, the prevalence of post-herpetic neuralgia was low, and no patients had more than mild pain after 3 months (5 patients [1.8%] after 3 mo; 2 patients [0.7%] after 12 mo). In patients ≥ 60 years of age, the frequency and severity of neuralgia increased. After 3 months, 25 patients (20%) had pain, and 2 patients (1.7%) had severe pain. After 12 months, 12 patients (9.4%) had pain, but none had severe pain. None of a random sample of 183 patients who were free of neuralgia at 12 months reported any recurrence of pain during long term follow up (3.2 to 7.0 y). Among 14 patients (all ages) who reported pain after 12 months, 12 considered the pain mild.

Conclusions
In patients with a first episode of herpes zoster, the course of disease was benign among those < 60 years of age. In older patients, the frequency of neuralgia increased, but pain severity was rarely more than mild. Patients free of pain had no pain recurrence.

*Information provided by author.