

# Pain Insights

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*Courtesy of Joe De Santi, M.D.*

## CHEST PAIN

Of all the types of pain, chest pain is perhaps the most misunderstood and feared. Chest pain can result from a wide variety of causes such as vascular disease, like aneurysms; infection, which scars the internal chest wall lining or produces chronic cough; trauma which involves muscular strain, ligamentous sprain, joint dislocations and bone fractures; autoimmune disease that causes chronic arthritis in the joints; medications like certain anti-depressants; inflammation of the muscles or joints, and tumors which destroy tissue or cause direct compression.

Obviously, a thorough history and comprehensive examination are essential tools to a correct diagnosis when one considers these numerous possibilities. Since most people have experienced some form of chest pain in their lives, we should clarify that the chest includes the upper and mid back regions as well as the front and sides. Given the complex movements of the neck, rib cage, upper extremities and the vast array of joint articulations in these structural areas, it's no surprise that pain can occur.

While direct injury to the musculoskeletal structures of the chest typically cause most problems associated with chest pain, another common culprit is a condition seen with shingles. Shingles is a reactivation of the chickenpox virus which an individual carries in a dormant state most of their adult life after infection as a child. Age, stress and illness are common causes of reactivation. The intense pain of shingles is commonly due to the sensory nerve irritation caused by reactivation of the virus in a specific region of the skin.

While most causes of chest pain can be treated effectively with anti-inflammatory medications, ice or heat, rest and appropriate surgical repair and rehabilitation, shingles can be an insidious source of chronic problems for some people. As there is no "cure" for shingles, since you already have the virus in you, the hope of suppressing a reactivation is the only means to prevent a possible chronic pain problem. As a result, a vaccination for shingles was developed for just this purpose. It is currently the best way to prevent shingles from occurring, but it is not a treatment or cure. While we can't always predict or prevent an injury from occurring, this is an excellent example of how a preventive strategy can work. Most people who have ever had shingles will tell you that it's better to prevent this type of pain than have to deal with it.