

I've been **thinking...**



March 2015—SOS, Shingles, and the V-Word

I've been thinking about SOS, shingles, and the v-word.

SOS is the worldwide signal for distress. When originally used in 1908, the letters did not represent words. Rather, the characters were chosen for the ease with which they could be telegraphed and deciphered via Morse Code. The [signal](#) employs perhaps the least ambiguous combinations available: dot-dot-dot, dash-dash-dash, and dot-dot-dot.

The maritime call letters quickly evolved into an acronym for "save our ship." War veterans of the greatest generation also told us how SOS was borrowed by sailors to describe their daily portions of creamed chipped beef on toast a.k.a. sh*t on a shingle, a dish my mother occasionally served, except with hamburger and under a different alias. Here's a [recipe](#) in case you were deprived in your childhood.

Mom was what we Christians typically called a godly woman. Not as much for her clean mouth as for her open ears and dirty hands—loving everyone she met, listening to anyone who needed to talk, and rolling up her sleeves to lend a hand to others in need. I think of friends she bathed in their final battles with AIDS. Hers was a life worth emulating.

Although, on a road trip through Oregon (I was a preteen and mom was in her early 30s) I thought I heard her swear. Dad was behind the wheel, obsessing over seeing every last dam along the Metolius River while my brother and I were tussling in the back seat. Several hours into the boredom, mom reached her limit, "Edgar, no one really cares about this *dam* country but you!" My brother and I suspended our fight to protest, "Oooh, mom. You used the d-word!" Years passed before I reluctantly admitted the homophone she deployed probably did not end with "n."

Nope, I never did hear mom swear—well—that is until 50-some years later, when she was assaulted by herpes zoster, better known as shingles.

According to the [Institutes of Health](#), each year a million people in the United States come down with the virus. [One in three](#) adults will experience it at least once in their lifetime. For about one in five victims, severe pain continues long after the few weeks of pox and itching disappear. It's called post-herpetic neuralgia and is even nastier than it sounds. Mom was in the unfortunate 20 percent.

For six or seven years, Juanita was tormented by unrelenting waves of what she described as electric shocks shooting across her back and around her side. A taser-torture session from an episode of *The Blacklist* comes to mind. Most of the time she responded by yelping an "Ouch!" or two. One time, however, the voltage was so severe she involuntarily let the s-bomb fly.

And yet, amidst the tumult, mom's faith in God was harder to turn than a battleship in a bathtub. Like suffering Job in the Bible she read, mom professed, "Though he slay me yet will I trust in him."

Knowing my readers, I'm sure a few are disappointed that I used the s-word, while others are wondering why on earth I had to bring God into the equation.

Maybe I can wiggle out of this awkwardness into something less controversial and throw out the v-word—that would be vacc*nation.

Relax. I'm not going to enter the fray over vaccinating children, a topic which seems to be trending ahead of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict these days. But I will admit a personal bias concerning [ZOSTAVAX®](#), the relatively new vaccine for heading off shingles.

After witnessing my mother's war against the virus, I'm committed to a détente plan involving two strategies. Neither is failsafe, but I like what they do to my chances for not following the otherwise exemplary woman into the realm of shingles.

First, I bank on mom's persistent advice: "Pray that you never get the shingles." I imagine some people who had never prayed in their lives started when post-herpetic neuralgia shrapnel started flying their way.

Second, as soon as I learned that the shingles vaccine was available (2006), I was among the first in line to get the shot.

The Institutes of Health notes that in clinical trials, the vaccine reduced the risk of shingles by better than 50 percent. It may also reduce pain, they say, in people who still get shingles after being vaccinated.

I cared not that my insurance didn't cover the injection. It was the easiest \$300 I've ever put on my credit card. If your insurance doesn't cover the vaccination, Walgreens will stick you for around \$200.

If she were here and knew of friends who couldn't afford the shot, Juanita certainly would have prayed for them and probably would have slipped them two Ben Franklins.

SOS—stave off shingles.

DISCLAIMER: The above is merely my opinion. I am *not* a doctor but [I have stayed at a Holiday Inn Express](#).

What do you think?

Mark Neuenschwander a.k.a. Noosh
mark@hospitalrx.com