



Genital herpes

March 2009

While every effort has been taken to ensure the accuracy of the information in this publication, it cannot replace medical advice. Please visit a health professional if you have any concerns with your health. Included below is a list of places where you can get more information.

What are genital herpes?

Genital herpes are blisters or sores on the genitals. They are caused by either Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV) Type I or Type II. HSV Type I is more common on the mouth (cold sores) and HSV Type II on the genitals. Both viruses can infect the mouth and the genital area.

How do you get genital herpes?

Herpes are spread by skin-to-skin contact with someone who has the virus, including contact with infected skin during sex. Cold sores on the mouth can spread the virus to the genitals during oral sex. There is no cure for herpes. Once you have the virus, it stays in the nerves of the infected area of skin. It can be dormant ('sleeping') for some time and then flare up, sometimes causing an 'episode' of sores. Herpes are most easily passed on when you can see blisters or sores. But it can be passed on even when there aren't any sores; this is most common in the first 2 years of infection.

What are the signs and symptoms of genital herpes?

- When a person is first infected, they may not get sores. Many people with genital herpes don't know because they have no symptoms.
- The first herpes episode is usually the worst. You may feel generally unwell as if you are getting the flu, then small blisters appear. They burst and become sores.
- Later, scabs form, and finally the skin heals after 1 or 2 weeks.
- In females, blisters may appear around the vagina, the urethra, the cervix, or between the vagina and the anus.
- In males, blisters may appear on the penis and foreskin, and sometimes inside the urethra, on the scrotum or in the area between the penis and the anus. It can be very painful to pass urine if it runs over the sores.
- Rarely, herpes can appear on the buttocks, lower back and other areas below the waist, as well as the hands, breasts, back, fingers – anywhere that has touched an infected area.
- Many cases of genital herpes don't show up as blisters. They can appear as a small area of rash, cracked skin, or some other skin condition on the genitals.
- Have any unusual condition of the genital skin checked out by a doctor and tested



for herpes. Although herpes sores heal, the virus stays in the body, and you can have more outbreaks. These are called recurrent episodes.

Recurrent episodes

Recurrent episodes usually occur on the same part of the body as the first attack, but are often shorter and milder. Recurrent episodes are less likely with HSV Type I infection. Usually they happen less often and are milder over time, and can just stop. Some infected people never get more than 1 episode. Some people can have herpes but never have symptoms. Herpes episodes are more likely to happen when your immune system is weak. Illness, tiredness, stress, periods or sexual activity can trigger them, but they can occur for no obvious reason.

How do I know if I have genital herpes?

Your doctor will take a sample from an infected area with a swab and send it to a laboratory. It's best if the sore or blister is less than 4 days old. You may need a blood test as well to see which type of HSV you have.

What do I do if I have genital herpes?

Go and see your GP or doctor of choice if you think you may have genital herpes.

How do I get treated?

During an episode of genital herpes these things may help:

- Paracetamol or aspirin can reduce pain and soreness
- Betadine paint will dry out the blisters and help stop the sores from getting infected
- Bathing sores with salt water (2 teaspoons of salt per litre, or 1 cup of salt in a bath) can help them heal
- Applying an anaesthetic jelly or cream can reduce the pain, particularly when passing urine
- If it hurts to urinate, you can also try passing urine while sitting in a warm bath.

Your doctor may prescribe anti-viral drugs. These ease the pain and severity of episodes, especially if you take them within 2 days of any sign of blisters. If you have lots of outbreaks you need to take medicine all the time. Anti-viral drugs can't cure you or stop you passing herpes on to another person. However, they can reduce the symptoms, and lower the risk of infecting another person when you don't have any symptoms.

How do I reduce the risks of getting genital herpes?

Herpes is passed on to another person by skin-to-skin contact from an infected area. Herpes is most infectious from the first signs of sores developing (tingling of the skin, numbness or shooting pains) until the scabs have gone.

To protect yourself and your partner, avoid sex when there are any signs of sores on the genitals. Don't have oral sex when there is any sign of a cold sore on the mouth. You can pass on herpes to someone even when you have no visible blisters or sores. This is most likely when you've just caught the virus. You can't catch herpes or pass it on to another person unless you have skin-to-skin contact with the infected area.

Condoms with water-based lubricant and dental dams reduce the risk, but they only protect the area of skin covered by the condom or dental dam. But they do protect you against other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Talking about herpes or any STI can be difficult, but any person you have sex with has a right to know if you have herpes. Discuss it when you are feeling relaxed and confident, and not just before you have sex. Your partner will appreciate your honesty and that you don't want to infect him/her. You also have the right to know if they are infected too.

Is there a vaccination against genital herpes?

There is no vaccination for genital herpes.

Pregnancy and herpes

An infected mother can pass herpes on to her baby during birth, causing serious illness. This is most serious in women who have their first episode of herpes just before delivery. Women who already have the virus when they get pregnant have protective antibodies which protect the baby too, so it's very unlikely to be infected. If you become pregnant, tell your doctor if you or your partner have ever had a herpes episode. Your doctor can then work out the risk of an episode at birth and any possible risk to the baby.

Coping with Herpes

Herpes only affects a small area of skin. It doesn't usually make you ill, and it has no obvious long-term side effects in healthy adults. If you have herpes, don't feel ashamed or guilty, or think you can't have sex.

The Australian Herpes Management Forum has a web site for people affected with and concerned by Genital Herpes: www.ahmf.com.au

You can contact the Perth Herpes Group on (08) 9487 6999 or www.geocities.com/perthgroup

Where can I find more information on genital herpes?

For further information contact your GP, a doctor of your choice, telephone Health Direct (1800 022 222) or the Sexual Health Helpline (9227 6178 for metropolitan callers or 1800 198 205 for country callers).

Produced by Communicable Disease Control Directorate
© Department of Health, Western Australia January 2009