

Genital Herpes

What Causes It?

Genital herpes is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections in the United States with an estimated 48 million people infected. The majority of infected individuals have no symptoms and are not aware they carry the virus. Genital herpes is caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV), the same family of viruses that cause cold sores, chicken pox, and shingles. There are 2 types of HSV; both types can cause genital herpes. Type 1 most commonly causes fever blisters or cold sores on the lips. Type 2 most commonly causes genital sores, but also can infect the mouth. Both types cause genital herpes through direct skin-to-skin contact.

Once infected with HSV, people remain infected for the rest of their lives. Some may experience only a single outbreak and others may experience

recurrent episodes, on average 4 to 5 times a year. Recurrent episodes are generally milder than the first. Common triggers for repeat episodes include stress, impaired immune status/other illness, trauma, intercourse, menses, and sun exposure. Women with active HSV can transmit the infection to their baby during childbirth, which may cause serious problems to the infant. A woman who has active vaginal sores when she goes into labor may require a cesarean section to protect the baby.



What are the Symptoms?

As many as 80% of people with genital herpes are not aware that they have the disease because they do not develop or recognize the symptoms. The virus spreads by "shedding" which means it multiplies and is released from the skin. HSV may be transmitted when there are no symptoms or sores, usually just before an outbreak. This is called "asymptomatic shedding". When symptoms do occur, usually about a week after exposure to HSV, they include itching, burning, soreness, and small blisters in the genital area. The blisters

burst leaving small, painful ulcers, which heal in 10 to 21 days.

Treatment and Prevention

While there is no cure for genital herpes, antiviral drugs are generally used to treat genital herpes: Acyclovir (available at the Health Center), Famciclovir, and Valacyclovir.

Medication in tablet or capsule form has been found to be more effective than ointments in helping sores heal faster and limiting recurrences. Antiviral drugs may be used:

- at the time of an outbreak (episodic treatment)
- at the earliest sign or symptom of a repeat outbreak (episodic suppression). Most people with recurrent outbreaks can tell when another episode is starting because they notice tingling in the same area where they have experienced HSV before.
- If more than six outbreaks have occurred in a year, a daily antiviral dose may be prescribed for 3 to 6 months (continuous suppressive therapy).

The safety of antiviral drugs in pregnancy has not been established. Some people have found supplements of the amino acid L-lysine to be useful in preventing outbreaks, but human studies involving lysine supplementation have shown inconsistent results. It may be helpful to try eating more foods high in lysine (yogurt, fish, potatoes, brewer's yeast) and fewer foods high in another amino acid called arginine (chocolate, nuts, and seeds).

To avoid spreading the infection to other parts of the body or to other people during the acute phase:

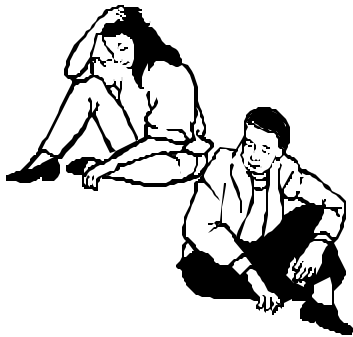
- Keep the infected area clean and dry.
- Avoid touching the sores: wash hands after any contact with the sores.
- Avoid sexual contact from the time the first symptoms are recognized until the sores are completely healed and new skin has formed.
- Wear loose-fitting, cotton clothes.
- Pour water over the lesions when urinating to rinse urine away
- Condoms may help to reduce new cases of genital herpes, but they do not



provide total protection because the herpes lesions generally extend beyond the area covered by the condom. The skin-to-skin contact of uncovered lesions allows for viral transmission despite "safer" sexual practices.

Telling Partners

While telling a partner involves risk of rejection, it may also prove to be key in creating an honest, open and accepting relationship. Telling allows your partner to make an informed choice and prevents future misunderstandings. If possible, bring up the subject before you are intimate. Give your partner time to adjust to the idea and provide him or her with informational resources to help dispel any myths or misinformation. You can enjoy an active, healthy sex life but you need to accept responsibility and take precautions not to spread the disease.



For More Information

CDC National STD Hotline

Phone: (800) 227-8922

National Institute of Allergy & Infectious Disease

<http://www.niaid.nih.gov/factsheets/stdherp.htm>

National Herpes Hotline

(919) 361-8488, Monday- Friday 9a.m. - 7p.m. EST

www.drweil.com

American Social Health Assoc. Herpes Resource Center

PO Box 13827
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-9940

<http://www.advicecenter.com>

Herpes Resource Center

<http://www.ashastd.org/herpes/hrc/toc.html>

