

What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is a very common sexually transmitted infection (STI). It is caused by two viruses called herpes simplex type 1 (HSV 1) and herpes simplex type 2 (HSV 2).

What are the symptoms?

Most of the time there are no symptoms. Because they have no symptoms many people don't know they have herpes.

Herpes can cause one or more blisters or sores on the vagina, thighs, penis, scrotum, butt, or anus. The sores can feel itchy and/or painful. Sometimes they cause burning with urination. You may have them only once and never again, but because the virus stays in your body forever, sores can come back again in weeks, months, or years in the same or different places. When the sores come back, it is called an "outbreak."

The first time you have sores it is usually the worst time. You may also have swollen glands, fevers, and body aches - like you have the flu. The first outbreak usually takes 2 to 4 weeks to heal. Many people have "warning signs" before they have an outbreak. Warning signs include itching, burning, or tingling on your genitals. After the first time, outbreaks usually happen less often, become less painful, and heal in 10 to 14 days.

How do you get genital herpes?

Genital herpes is spread by skin touching skin - usually by having oral, vaginal, or anal sex with someone who has the infection.

The virus lives in the fluid in a herpes sore. It also can be released from the skin of people who don't get sores. This is known as "asymptomatic shedding", and is common. This is also why it is not always possible to tell exactly when you got herpes or who passed it to you.

How can I find out if I have genital herpes?

Only a doctor or nurse can diagnose herpes by looking at it or by taking a sample from the sore and having it tested. This is called a culture. Cultures work best if taken within 1 to 2 days of when you notice symptoms. Other STIs can cause sores that look like herpes, so it's important to get yourself tested so you get the right treatment.

If you are not having symptoms, you can talk to your doctor or nurse about a blood test. Routine testing of people without symptoms or known exposure to herpes is not recommended. However, there are certain circumstances when it might be helpful.

How is genital herpes treated?

Although the virus stays in your body for life and cannot be cured, there are medicines to help with outbreaks. They can be prescribed by your doctor or nurse and you may take them

- when you have an outbreak. This reduces the symptoms and shortens the outbreak, and works best if you start the medicine as soon as you notice symptoms.

OR

- every day to prevent future outbreaks. This can also decrease the risk of passing herpes to your partner.

You might choose not to take medicine. If your symptoms or outbreaks are not bothersome or if you are not currently having sex, this may be right for you.

(continued on page 2)

For a **first episode** (primary outbreak), you have been given:

- Acyclovir 400 mg orally three times a day for 7-10 days
- Acyclovir 200 mg orally five times a day for 7-10 days
- Valacyclovir 1 gm orally twice a day for 7-10 days

For a **recurrent episode**, you have been given:

- Acyclovir 400 mg orally three times a day for 5 days
- Acyclovir 800 mg orally twice a day for 5 days
- Acyclovir 800 mg orally three times a day for 2 days
- Valacyclovir 500 mg orally for 3 days
- Valacyclovir 1 gm orally once a day for 5 days

For **suppressive therapy**, you have been given:

- Acyclovir 400 mg orally twice a day
- Valacyclovir 500 mg orally daily
- Valacyclovir 1 gm orally daily

Taking good care of yourself by following a good diet, getting enough rest and sleep, and keeping your stress levels down may also help prevent outbreaks.

To reduce pain during an outbreak, try

- sitting in warm water for about 20 minutes using a portable bath (a Sitz bath) or your bathtub.
- keeping the genital area clean and dry, and avoid tight clothes.
- taking acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin).

How do I tell my partner that I have herpes?

You may be concerned about how genital herpes will affect your health, sex life, and relationships. For some people, telling a partner that they have genital herpes may make them feel unsafe. Talk to your doctor or nurse about managing your infection, how to talk to sex partners, and keeping yourself safe. Counseling and support groups may also be helpful.

What can I do to not get herpes?

The best way to protect yourself is to not have sex. If you do have sex:

- talk to your partner about any history of STIs before you have sex with each other.
- use condoms every time you have sex.
- avoid sex if your partner has a herpes outbreak.

What can I do to not pass herpes to my sex partner?

- Tell your partner that you have herpes.
- Use a condom every time you have sex.
- When you have symptoms
 - do not have vaginal, anal, or oral sex — even with protection — as soon as you feel warning signs of an outbreak.
 - wait at least 7 days after the sores heal before you start to have sex again.
 - don't touch the sores. If you do, wash your hands with soap and water — this kills the virus.
 - If you have a sore on your mouth, don't kiss anyone or have oral sex.
- Talk to your doctor or nurse about starting medicine

Herpes and HIV

If you have herpes, it is especially important to practice safer sex. People with genital herpes have at least twice the risk of getting HIV if exposed to it than people without herpes. And people with HIV and genital herpes are more likely to pass HIV to their partners.

Could genital herpes harm my pregnancy?

If you are pregnant, tell your doctor or nurse if you have been diagnosed with genital herpes.

Sometimes genital herpes can cause miscarriage or delivering too early. Rarely it can be passed to a newborn during childbirth. This can cause brain damage and eye problems in the baby. You may be given medicine towards the end of your pregnancy to decrease the risk of passing the infection on.

If you have never been diagnosed with genital herpes, the most important thing you can do is to avoid getting it during your pregnancy because a new infection is the most dangerous to the pregnancy.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Division of STD Prevention (DSTDP)
**Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention** <http://www.cdc.gov/std/>
CDC-INFO Contact Center 1-800-CDC-INFO
(1-800-232-4636) Email: cdcinfo@cdc.gov

American Social Health Association (ASHA)
1-800-783-9877 www.ashastd.org

National Herpes Hotline (919) 361-8488
National Herpes Resource
Center <http://www.ashastd.org/hrc>