

Genital Herpes

Information Sheet

What is it?

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). This virus causes blisters and sores that come and go away on their own, but they can return, often when you are ill or under stress.

How is it spread?

Herpes is spread by direct contact with the rashes, sores, or blisters of an infected person. This can happen during oral, vaginal or any sex and genital to genital contact. Some people can feel a tingling in the infected area before an outbreak of blisters. The virus may be passed on to the sexual partner(s) or other parts of the body through direct contact with the tingling area. Herpes may be passed even when no sores are present.

Babies born to mothers with active herpes sores can become infected during birth.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of herpes usually appear about 2 to 21 days after sexual contact with an infected person. Blisters, rashes or sores appear where the virus entered the body. The common sites are mouth, vagina, cervix, penis, anus, buttocks, or around the genitals. They can also appear on other parts of the body.

With the first infection, there may be fever, joint pain, flu-like symptoms, pain when passing urine, itching, tingling and enlarged tender glands. Blisters break out in open sores and are often very painful. They generally heal in 1 to 2 weeks without scarring. In some people outbreaks are so mild the person never notices them.

Once you are infected with HSV, the virus remains in your body. Most of the time, the virus rests in the nerve endings. When the virus, the sores and blisters will come back. These blisters and sores are usually less painful and heal faster. How often the virus becomes active again varies from person to person. Factors that may trigger the virus to become active again include sunlight, injury to the infected area, fever, menstruation, poor diet, stress and lowered immune system.

How is it diagnosed?

Herpes can be diagnosed by a physical examination and medical history. A swab of the fluid from the sores or blisters can be sent to a laboratory for testing.

What are the complications?

The virus can be moved from the location of an outbreak to other places on the body by touching the sores. The fingers, eyes and other body areas can accidentally become infected in this way.

Herpes of the eyes can cause blindness. Herpes sores can become infected with bacteria. On rare occasions, babies born to mothers with a first outbreak may become infected during birth and develop herpes shortly after birth. Women with recurrent herpes are less likely to pass the virus on to their newborn.

How is it treated?

There is no cure for herpes. Anti-viral pills help to reduce symptoms and speed the healing of the blisters or sores. Some anti-viral pills used for herpes are famciclovir, valcyclovir and acyclovir. Anti-viral cream has limited use for the first time infections.

Medication for pain, bath salts, cold compresses and urinating in water may help to relieve discomfort. Keeping the infected area clean and dry, wearing cotton underwear and loose clothing can also help to reduce discomfort. To prevent spreading the virus to other parts of the body, wash hands well after touching the sores and blisters.

What about sexual partners?

If you have herpes, your sexual partner(s) should be informed. The only way to prevent herpes is to avoid direct contact with the sores. Using condoms during sex provides some protection from herpes.

Is follow-up important?

You may go back to your doctor or clinic if you develop skin infection around the herpes sores or if you need to know more about how to manage recurring herpes. Women with herpes should have an annual Pap test. If you are pregnant, you need to inform your doctor of your history of herpes infection.

Remember:

- ✓ If you are pregnant, do not take any anti-viral medication. You need to inform your doctor about your history of herpes infection.
- ✓ Avoid sexual or close body contact with sexual partner(s) until all your herpes blisters or sores are healed.
- ✓ Wash hands after touching sores and blisters to avoid spreading the infection
- ✓ Use condoms to lower the chance of getting STDs and to prevent pregnancy
- ✓ It is possible to have more than one infection at a time, so it is important to be tested for other STDs