

What You Should Know About Genital Herpes

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted disease caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV-1 or HSV-2). Herpes infection is very common in the United States, affecting about 1 in 5 people aged 12 and older, most of them women. Unfortunately, many do not know they have the virus. As high as those numbers are, however, genital herpes due to type 2 is on the decline. One of the reasons is better education about herpes and how it is spread.

How sexual transmission happens

Although herpes is called a sexually transmitted disease, it is not passed only through sexual intercourse but also by skin-to-skin contact. Two main types of the herpes virus can cause genital herpes: HSV type 1 (HSV-1) and HSV type 2 (HSV-2). HSV-1 can cause genital herpes but it more commonly causes “fever blisters,” which are infections of the mouth and lips. Most commonly, genital herpes is transmitted from a person who has a genital HSV-2 infection to a partner who does not. However, genital herpes due to HSV-1 can be spread by oral-genital sex.

Before the blisters appear, you might have symptoms that signal an outbreak: sensitive skin, tingling, burning, itching, or pain where the blisters will develop.

Know these symptoms

The most recognized symptoms of genital herpes are small painful blisters in the genital and rectal area. However, genital herpes lesions can occur anywhere in the ‘boxer shorts’ area. Before the blisters appear, you might have symptoms that signal an outbreak: sensitive skin, tingling, burning, itching, or pain where the blisters will

develop. With an initial infection, symptoms can include fever, muscle aches, fatigue, and reduced appetite. Women may also have vaginal discharge and painful urination.

When the blisters break, they can leave sores that can be very painful. The sores eventually crust over and heal, but it can take between a week (for recurrent outbreaks) and up to 3 weeks with the first outbreak.

The first outbreak is usually the worst. It is most likely to happen within 2 weeks after the virus is transmitted. Symptoms, if they exist, are generally more troublesome during the first episode. Typically, another outbreak occurs weeks or months after the first but is less severe and does not last as long. However, up to 70% of people can be infected with the virus and not have symptoms for a long time (months to years), and people can be infected with the virus for years before the herpes infection is diagnosed.

Diagnosis and treatment

Because the symptoms can vary widely and be quite subtle, genital herpes is often misdiagnosed in women. It may be diagnosed, for example, as a yeast infection, hemorrhoids, urinary tract infection, or vaginitis.

The virus can be detected by a laboratory test called a culture, in which the health care provider swabs a suspected herpes sore, but it is possible to have a culture that does not show HSV even if you have it. A blood test is more definite.



So far, there is no cure for genital herpes. However, antiviral medicine can be taken for each outbreak. This relieves the pain and heals sores faster. To get the most benefit from treatment, you should start it as soon as you notice the early symptoms of tingling, burning, or itching. Warm baths can help relieve the pain. People with frequent outbreaks may prefer daily suppressive therapy. To help reduce your chances of spreading herpes to another person, daily antiviral therapy is also recommended.

You may get more outbreaks

The herpes virus stays in your nerve cells for the rest of your life. If the virus is reactivated, it travels along the nerves to your skin. Sometimes reactivation causes symptoms and sometimes it does not, yet the virus is still present and can be spread to others.

Various conditions can trigger a recurrence, such as fatigue, illness, menstruation, and physical and emotional stress. Sexual activity may also trigger an attack. Recurrent attacks can be as seldom as once a year, or you might never have another one. The average is about 2 to 5 per year. Over time, the outbreaks usually become milder and less frequent.

If your immune system is weakened by an illness such as AIDS or by chemotherapy or steroid treatment, outbreaks can be more severe and long-lasting.

Herpes is very contagious

One of the reasons herpes is so contagious is the person who has it often does not know it. Symptoms can be very subtle. Another reason is that the virus can be shed (released) not only from the visible sores, but between outbreaks as well, even when sores are not visible.

Women need to be very aware of the risk of herpes during the childbearing years. Transmitting HSV to a baby during birth is rare, but women with active genital herpes are often advised to have a cesarean delivery to help reduce the risk. If you are pregnant and infected with genital herpes, your health care provider may recommend taking antiviral therapy during the last month of your pregnancy to reduce your chances of having an outbreak.

Women who have herpes have a greater risk of getting HIV, perhaps because of the open sores or because of factors related to the immune system. HIV-positive people with HSV-2 may also be more contagious.

The only way to be sure of not getting the infection is to not have sex, or to be in a long-term relationship with a partner who has been tested and has no infection. Latex condoms, used correctly, can help reduce the risk. Anyone who has herpes should not have sex with an uninfected partner when any sores are visible, of course, but it is also important to remember that sores do not have to be visible for the infection to be spread. To be on the safer side, do not have sexual contact from the time of your first genital symptoms until they are completely gone. Consider using daily antiviral therapy to reduce the risk of transmitting herpes. Also avoid touching the infected area during an outbreak and wash your hands if you do touch an infected area.

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Living with herpes

Genital herpes is not life-threatening, but it can be life-altering if you don't know how to cope with it. Genital herpes can increase your risk of becoming infected with HIV and can be passed along to your child during delivery. If you or your partner has genital herpes, it is extremely important to honestly discuss the situation. Counseling can help you deal with the disease and its effects on your life. It can be a shock to be diagnosed with genital herpes, but once you know what to do about it, you can learn to live with it.

RESOURCES

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**
www.cdc.gov/std/Herpes/STDFact-Herpes.htm
- **American Social Health Association**
www.ashastd.org/herpes/herpes_learn.cfm
- **American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists**
www.acog.org/publications/patient_education/bp054.cfm