



Herpes Virus Infections

➤ **What is Genital Herpes?**

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted disease caused by the herpes simplex virus or HSV. It is the same virus that causes oral herpes, i.e., cold sores or fever blisters around the mouth and lips. There are two strains of the virus. Type 1 tends to cause cold sores; type 2 tends to cause genital herpes. Oral infection can spread to the genital area by oral sex and vice versa, however.

Genital herpes is very common. One out of every five teenagers and adults has been infected and can transmit the disease, although many of these (perhaps up to 90%) have never had any symptoms recognized as herpes infection.

➤ **What are the symptoms?**

Unfortunately, most people who have genital herpes don't know it because they never have any symptoms. When there are symptoms, the first infection is usually the worst. It occurs 2-10 days after exposure. Painful sores develop on the area of contact, usually the penis, vagina, or rectum. The blisters rupture to become small ulcers. There may be fever, painful lymph glands, muscle aches, painful urination, and vaginal discharge. The sores become crusted and heal in about 3 weeks without leaving a scar.

➤ **Will I have outbreaks again?**

Many people with both oral and genital herpes have recurrent outbreaks from time to time. After the virus causes its initial infection, it travels to the nerves in the spine where it remains inactive. Periodically, it becomes active again and travels along the nerves back out to the skin, causing painful blisters which are very contagious. This is usually at the same area where the initial infection occurred. The symptoms are milder and resolve in 7-10 days. Tingling, burning, or itching in that skin area may precede outbreaks. Recurrences vary widely; some people have none, some have several per year. Triggers for recurrences may include fever, trauma, menstruation, sunlight, and sexual intercourse. The virus can also become active but cause no symptoms, so, unfortunately, those infected with herpes virus can be contagious and not know it.

➤ **Can herpes be serious?**

Usually not. However, if a pregnant woman gets a first-time infection with genital herpes, the baby can be seriously affected. Also, a baby can be infected with herpes during passage through the birth canal if there is reactivation of the virus at the time of labor. It is very important for pregnant women to inform the obstetrician if she has had a history of genital herpes.

➤ **What is the treatment?**

There is no cure for herpes infection. There are, however, antiviral medicines that clearly shorten the duration of *first* herpes infections if started early. These are acyclovir (Zovirax®), famcyclovir (Famvir®), and valacyclovir (Valtrex®). Zovirax® is available in a topical ointment, but this has not been shown to be better than placebo. For those who have six or more recurrences per year, the oral medicines taken every day help to decrease the number of recurrent outbreaks. These medicines are also used when an outbreak occurs, but the benefit is less clear. Some studies have shown them to decrease the severity or the duration of the outbreak, but other



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studies have not. These drugs don't have many side effects, but they are expensive. It may be best for you to try the medicine and see if your outbreaks are truly improved.

During a herpes outbreak, the sores should be kept clean. Wear cotton underclothes to avoid excessive heat or moisture. Tylenol® may be taken for pain. Wash your hands after contact with the sores. Avoid sexual contact from the time you first feel any symptoms until the sores are completely healed, that is, the scab has fallen off and new skin has formed where the sore was.

➤ **How can I prevent getting genital herpes?**

The best way to avoid getting genital herpes is to limit sexual relationships and always use condoms. Talk with your partner about past relationships before having sex. If you or your partner has an outbreak of genital herpes, don't have sex until the sores are completely healed. Between outbreaks,

using condoms during sex may help protect against the virus.

Blood tests are available to tell whether someone has had herpes in the past. Talk to your health care provider for more information.

➤ **Where can I get more information?**

American Social Health Assn

800-230-6039

www.ashastd.org

National Herpes Hotline

919-361-8488

American College of Ob/Gyn

202-863-2518

www.acog.org

