

Genital Herpes

Genital herpes is caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV) type 1 or type 2. Type 1 generally infects the mouth (causing cold sores), while type 2 generally infects the genital area (genital herpes), but either type can affect either area of the body (eg if you have a cold sore it can be passed on through unprotected oral sex).

It is estimated that in the general population 85% of people carry HSV type 1 and 20% carry HSV type 2. There is currently no cure for herpes, but effective treatments are available.

Symptoms

Only about 1 in 5 people infected with either of the viruses are aware that they carry any infection. The majority of people have such minor symptoms that they remain unaware of any problem.

While many people experience no symptoms at all, the first symptom of a herpes infection is often an itching or tingling sensation in the genital area. You may have flu-like symptoms with fever, headaches and muscle aches and pain.

Within one to two days a cluster of small blisters appears. They break and weep after a few days leaving sores that may crust over. The blisters may cause mild discomfort or be extremely painful. In a first outbreak, the blisters may take one to three weeks to heal, while subsequent outbreaks tend to heal more quickly. Occasionally blisters can form on other areas on the body.

In women, outbreaks of HSV type 2 can be anywhere on the genital area, but commonly occur around the vagina, urethra, cervix or anal area, and may be associated with a vaginal discharge. In men, outbreaks usually occur on the penis and under the foreskin, or around the anal area.

Once you are infected the virus remains in your body for life, and symptoms can come back many times. The first outbreak is often the worst, and any further attacks are usually milder. Blisters will often reappear in the same places.

How is it transmitted?

Herpes is passed on through skin to skin contact with a person who has the virus. This can occur through oral, vaginal or anal sex or other intimate contact. While having sex at a time when the skin is broken or inflamed increases the risk of contracting herpes, it can also be passed on between outbreaks (when the infection isn't always obvious).

How do I know if I have it?

Testing for herpes involves taking a swab from the infected area. If there are no symptoms at the time, a blood test may be used to determine if the virus is present. For more information about STI testing go to www.fpwa.org.au/healthinformation/information sheets/stitests/

There is no evidence that herpes causes cervical cancer, and much evidence that it doesn't.

Treatment/Management

The herpes virus cannot be cured, but it can be treated and controlled.

Bathing sores in salt water can assist with the healing process, as well as help to keep the infected area clean. Mild painkillers can reduce pain and inflammation, as can wearing loose cotton clothing. If it is painful to pass urine, pouring lukewarm water over the infected area while urinating can be helpful. Passing urine while sitting in a bath can also relieve discomfort.

Should recurrences of herpes occur frequently, be very distressing or interfere with your sex life, antiviral drugs can be used to ease symptoms and reduce further outbreaks. Your doctor will need to decide whether this treatment is appropriate, however medicines are very expensive in Australia, and certain conditions need to be fulfilled before you are eligible for a subsidy.

People with herpes need to discuss their situation with their sexual partner so that shared decisions can be made about sex and condom use. If you have a calm positive attitude, your partner will be more likely to be positive as well. You can enjoy an active, healthy sex life if you have herpes, but be responsible and take precautions not to spread the infection.

Prevention

Avoid any contact with the infected area. You are most infectious from just before sores begin developing to when the sores form a scab. Using condoms and dams reduces the risk of catching herpes, but it is important to remember that they only protect the area of the skin they cover. If there is an outbreak on the scrotum or vulva, condoms cannot stop the infection from being passed on. More information about condoms and dams

Up to 80% of people with a herpes infection have never had any symptoms and are therefore unaware of the risk of passing it on. Some people are able to identify triggers which will bring on a recurrence of herpes. This may be menstruation, stress, depression and other infections such as thrush. It is therefore important to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Pregnancy

It is important to tell the doctor caring for you in pregnancy if you have had herpes. Herpes can infect a newborn child if the birth canal has an active herpes infection at the time of the delivery of the baby. A caesarean section may be recommended by obstetricians to prevent the virus passing from the mother's skin to the baby's skin. This is rarely needed however and is more likely to happen when herpes is caught for the first time late in the pregnancy.

If the mother has herpes but the infection is not active, there is no virus in the birth canal to infect the baby. If a woman gets herpes for the first time during pregnancy there can be severe complications for her unborn baby. Women who have had herpes before the pregnancy have protective antibodies which are passed to the baby. This makes it very unlikely that the baby will be infected.

Can I pass it onto my partner?

Yes, herpes can be passed on through skin to skin contact. This is most likely if contact is during an attack with blisters or sores, but transmission can occur during an unrecognised outbreak. Be aware of the tingling and itching which often comes on just before blisters appear, as you are infectious at this time. Antiviral medications may reduce the likelihood of transmission to partners.

Condoms and dams reduce the risk of catching herpes but it is important to remember that they only protect the area of the skin they cover. If there is an outbreak on the scrotum or vulva, condoms and dams cannot stop the infection from being passed on. For more information about condoms and dams go to www.fpwa.org.au/healthinformation/information sheets/

For more information about herpes contact the Sexual Health Helpline on 9227 6177 or 1800 198 205 (country callers) or email sexhelp@fpwa.org.au

Practising safe sex reduces the risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmissible infections (STIs).



70 Roe Street, PO Box 141, Northbridge, WA, 6865
ph: (08) 9227 6177 fax: (08) 9227 6871
www.fpwa.org.au
info@fpwa.org.au

Sexual Health Helpline (08) 92276178 or 1800 198 205 (Country Callers)
sexhelp@fpwa.org.au

Quarry Health Centre for under 25s
7 Quarry Street, PO Box 378, Fremantle, WA, 6959
ph: (08) 9430 4544 fax: (08) 9430 4544
quarry@fpwa.org.au

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