



Genital Herpes

What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is an infection caused by the herpes simplex virus. The virus can cause painful blisters and sores on the genitals (sexual organs) and/or on the mouth.

How is it spread?

Genital herpes is spread by having unprotected sex – not using a condom – with someone who is infected with the herpes virus, whether the person has sores or not. Herpes can be spread from the mouth to the genitals when one partner has cold sores and engages in oral-genital sex. Even very small breaks in the skin allow the virus to enter and start an infection.

What are the symptoms?

Most people with herpes do not recognize the symptoms. Sometimes, symptoms may not become visible for months or years. You can have herpes and not know it.

Symptoms of genital herpes can include painful red dots or tiny blisters on the genitals, swollen glands, fever, and body aches. Other warning signs include itching, burning, tingling, and leg pain.

If you have symptoms, you need to be examined by a doctor or nurse and have lab tests done.

Usually, symptoms begin 2-14 days after having sex with someone who has herpes. The first outbreak of blisters is usually longer and more severe than outbreaks that may occur later.

After the first outbreak, the virus withdraws into the nerves below the skin in the area where the sores first appeared. During this time, the virus does not cause symptoms and remains inactive. Once a person is infected with the virus, it remains in the body for life. In most people, the virus becomes active from time to time, causing repeated blisters and sores.

What are the complications?

Complications are generally rare and usually occur with the first genital herpes outbreak.

Women who are newly infected late in pregnancy can pass the infection to their baby during childbirth.

If the virus travels to another part of the body, it may cause disease in that part of the body.

What is the treatment?

Medication is prescribed when herpes first develops or if the blisters continue to appear. Treatment helps reduce discomfort from the symptoms, but there is no cure for herpes.

A healthy lifestyle, such as a good diet, rest and exercise, may help reduce the number of outbreaks.

To ease discomfort when you have symptoms, try the following:

- Wear loose-fitting clothing and cotton underwear;
- Soak in warm water baths;
- Keep the infected area dry;
- Do not use medicated or non-medicated ointments or creams.

Do not have sex until you and your partner(s) have finished all the medication. Take all of the medication exactly as instructed.

Should I be tested for other sexually transmitted infections (STIs)?

If you have different sexual partners, or if your partner has different partners, you should be tested for other STIs including gonorrhea, chlamydia, syphilis, and HIV (the virus linked to AIDS). You should also consider getting a vaccine to prevent hepatitis B infection.

The more sexual partners you have, the higher your risk of getting a STI.

Ways to reduce your risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection

- The more partners you have, the more likely you are to be exposed to a sexually transmitted infection.
- To help protect yourself and your partner(s) from a sexually transmitted infection (STI), use a condom during any vaginal, oral, or anal sex.
- Latex and polyurethane male and female condoms help prevent the spread of many sexually transmitted infections including HIV.
- A new condom must be used each time you have sex.
- If a condom breaks, a pregnancy or sexually transmitted infection may occur. If a condom breaks during sex and you are concerned, talk to your health care provider.
- Use only water-based lubricants with male latex condoms. Oil-based lubricants, such as petroleum jelly, lotion or baby oil, can weaken and destroy latex.
- Store latex condoms at room temperature (not too hot and not too cold) and check the expiry date on the condom package.
- Spermicides containing nonoxynol-9 (N-9) may increase the risk of infection/transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and it is not recommended to prevent HIV or these infections.

For more information, see HealthLink BC File [#08o Condoms Help Prevent Sexually Transmitted Infections \(STIs\)](#).



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