



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), rectum, anus and/or the mouth. Blisters around the mouth are often called cold sores or fever blisters.

How is it spread?

Genital herpes is spread by having unprotected sex, not using a condom, with someone who has the herpes virus. The virus can be spread whether or not the person has symptoms such as sores. 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 can allow the virus to enter and start an infection.

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

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms vary from person to person. Most people never have symptoms, or the symptoms are so mild that they do not know they are infected. Sometimes, symptoms may not be noticeable for months or years.

Symptoms of a primary (new) genital herpes infection can include one or more painful red dots or blisters on the genitals, rectum, anus mouth. Symptoms can also include swollen glands, fever, and body aches. Warning signs that may occur before repeat outbreaks include itching, burning, and tingling of the skin at the infection site, and nerve pain down either leg.

If you have symptoms of genital herpes, you need to be visually examined by a health care provider who will swab your sores and may send you for lab blood test.

Many people who have a primary herpes infection may not have symptoms or do not notice any symptoms. If this is a new infection the symptoms

usually begin 2 to 14 days after having sex with a partner who has herpes. In a primary infection the blisters usually last longer and are more severe than outbreaks that may occur later.

After the first outbreak when symptoms disappear, the virus will become inactive. However, it will stay in the body's nervous system and can be reactivated months or years later. When it is reactivated, you will most often notice sores in the same place where they first appeared. Over time, repeat outbreaks tend to happen less often, have milder symptoms and therefore often go unnoticed.

What are the complications?

Complications are generally rare.

If you are pregnant, and you or your partner have genital herpes, there can be serious complications for the baby. It is very important to discuss this with the health care provider assisting with your pregnancy.

What is the treatment?

Medication can be prescribed when herpes first develops, or if the blisters or other symptoms reappear. The treatments will not cure herpes, but can help to reduce discomfort from the symptoms.

A healthy lifestyle, such as a good diet, rest, exercise, and reducing stress may help limit 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;
- Avoid sexual contact until symptoms have resolved.

How can I reduce my chance of getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI)?

Practice safe sex by using a condom

When used as directed, male and female condoms help prevent the spread of many STIs, including HIV, during vaginal, anal and oral sex. Condoms are less effective at protecting against STIs transmitted by skin-to-skin contact, such as herpes simplex, genital warts (human papillomavirus or HPV), and syphilis.

Important things to remember when using condoms:

- Check the condom package for damage and to ensure the expiry date has not passed.
- Carefully open the package so that the condom does not tear.
- Keep condoms away from sharp objects such as rings, studs, or piercings.
- Store condoms at room temperature.
- A new condom should be used every time you have sex.
- 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.
- Avoid using spermicides containing nonoxynol-9 (N-9). It irritates sexual tissue and may increase the chance of getting an STI.

Get vaccinated

Some STIs, such as hepatitis A, B and human papillomavirus (HPV) can be prevented with vaccines. Talk to your health care provider about how to get these vaccinations.

Know your sexual health status

If you have recently changed sexual partners, or have multiple sex partners, getting regularly tested for STIs will tell you if you have an infection. Finding and treating an STI, (including HIV) reduces the chances of passing the infection on to your partner.

The more partners you have, the more likely you are to be exposed to a sexually transmitted infection.

Talk about prevention

Talk to your partner about STIs and how you would like to prevent them before having sex. If you are having trouble discussing safer sex with your partner, talk about it with your health care provider or a counselor.

For tips on how to talk to your partner, visit the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) Smart Sex Resource at <http://smartsexresource.com/sex-talk/talk-about-it>

Informing Partners

If you have a sexually transmitted infection and are sexually active, it is important to tell your sexual partners. This will enable them to make decisions about their health and getting tested.

For More Information

For more information on how you can reduce your chance of getting an STI, see HealthLinkBC File #08o [Preventing Sexually Transmitted Infections \(STIs\)](#).

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles or your local public health unit.

Click on www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call 8-1-1 for non-emergency health information and services in B.C.

For deaf and hearing-impaired assistance, call 7-1-1 in B.C.

Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.



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