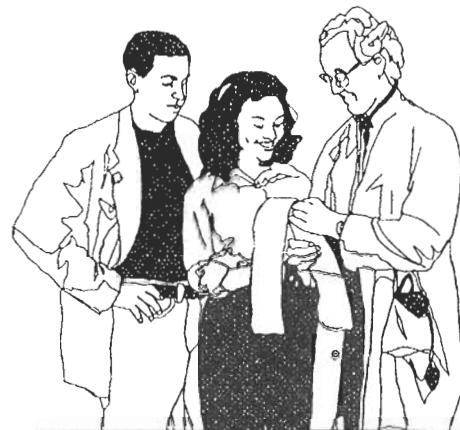


Understanding genital herpes



Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) that affects the genital areas of men and women. It is most commonly caused by the herpes simplex virus 2 (HSV-2) and less frequently by the herpes simplex virus 1 (HSV-1). Genital herpes is not a life-threatening disease. However, the virus never leaves your body, making it a lifelong condition that can recur at various times, with or without symptoms.

While there is no cure for genital herpes, there are treatments aimed at reducing the frequency, severity, and duration of symptoms.

Signs and symptoms

The telltale sign of genital herpes is a cluster of blisters, bumps, or rashes in the genital area, or on the thighs or buttocks. Before an outbreak, the infected area may become red and you may feel tingling, stinging, itching, or pain. This is called prodrome. Shortly afterwards, blisters, bumps, or other signs of an outbreak may appear. During outbreaks, the blisters may open, crust over, and heal as new skin forms. Genital herpes can also cause a variety of more subtle signs and symptoms that can be confused as jock itch, hemorrhoids, and other conditions.

First outbreak

The herpes simplex virus enters your body by penetrating the skin, and begins to multiply. Symptoms usually develop within 2 to 20 days after contact with the virus, causing blisters or inflammation. The initial outbreak can be the most severe, as people sometimes experience burning during urination and/or flu-like symptoms (swollen glands, headache, fever, etc.). For others, the first infection is mild and goes unnoticed. Initial outbreaks may last for approximately 2 to 3 weeks.

Latency

During the initial infection, the virus is transported to clusters of nerve cells along the lower region of the spinal cord. There, the virus evades the immune system and persists for life in an inactive form. During this period, infected individuals show no symptoms.

Recurrence

A genital herpes recurrence happens when the virus becomes reactivated and begins to multiply. Symptoms often reappear at the site of the original infection. While it is not known what causes a recurrence, many people with genital herpes associate flare-ups with skin irritation (like sunburn), menstruation, fatigue, vigorous sexual intercourse, or stress. Individuals with genital herpes have an average of 3 to 4 outbreaks a year. Recurrences usually become milder over time, with blisters healing within 6 to 10 days.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q How common is genital herpes?

A Over 50 million Americans currently have genital herpes, and approximately 500,000 new cases are diagnosed each year.

Q How do you get genital herpes?

A The virus passes from person to person through sexual contact (vaginal, oral, and anal). Even if you have no symptoms, it is possible to transmit the virus to a partner. *Use of condoms between outbreaks can help reduce the risk.*

Q Are the symptoms obvious?

A Not always. Up to 70% of people catch genital herpes from an infected partner who has no signs or symptoms. Also, because outbreaks are not always obvious, 9 out of 10 people who have genital herpes don't even know it.

Q If I think I have genital herpes, what should I do?

A See your healthcare provider immediately. Laboratory and blood tests can confirm a diagnosis. Among the most common is a viral culture in which fluid is taken from a blister (preferably as soon as it appears) and sent to a lab for study.

To learn more about genital herpes, check out www.herpeshelp.com

Reducing the risk of transmission



Once diagnosed with genital herpes, you can take precautions to reduce the risk of spreading it. There are two basic steps you can take:

- Avoid sexual contact when symptoms are present
- Use lubricated latex condoms between outbreaks

During outbreaks

The risk of spreading genital herpes is highest whenever symptoms are present. The obvious symptoms are an itchy red patch of skin near the genitals, or a blister. However, itching and tingling sensations are also a sign that the virus may be present on your skin. It is recommended that you avoid sexual contact until the skin lesions are fully healed and the skin surface looks normal again. If you do touch your sores, wash your hands immediately with soap and water.

Between outbreaks

The genital herpes virus can still be spread through the skin even though there are no visible signs of an outbreak. Experts recommend that it is important to use condoms during vaginal, oral, and anal sex to reduce the risk of transmission. While using condoms is not a 100% guarantee, they do reduce the risk of transmission if used properly.

Talking to your partner

The fact that genital herpes can be transmitted to your partner places an enormous responsibility on the person carrying the virus. The thought of telling another person that you have genital herpes can cause a lot of anxiety. It is important to realize that you and your partner have a right to an honest and open discussion about the risks involved. These tips might help:

- Allow yourself time to adjust. It is normal to feel emotionally stressed by herpes, especially when you first receive the diagnosis.
- It is important to share that you have genital herpes before you engage in any sexual contact.
- When sharing with a partner that you have genital herpes, begin the conversation by focusing on a positive aspect of your relationship.
- Try to be calm and confident. Keep things in perspective. Emphasize that flare-ups are occasional and there is medication available to treat them.
- Talk to your partner about the ways to help reduce the risk of transmission.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q If I take medication, can I still spread genital herpes to others?

A No drug has ever been proven to prevent the spread of herpes infection to other people. You or your partner should always use condoms and avoid sexual contact during an outbreak.

Q Can women with genital herpes have healthy babies?

A Yes, although genital herpes can be passed from mother to babies, women with genital herpes can and do have healthy babies all the time. It's important to talk openly with your obstetrician or other healthcare provider if you have genital herpes or become exposed to genital herpes during your pregnancy. They will carefully monitor you and take any steps necessary to reduce your risk of passing the virus to your newborn.

Q What is the risk for passing the herpes virus to a newborn?

A For women with known, long-standing infections, the risk of passing the herpes virus to a newborn is low. The risk is higher if the mother gets genital herpes for the first time during her pregnancy or has an active outbreak at the time of labor.

Q How will the baby be delivered?

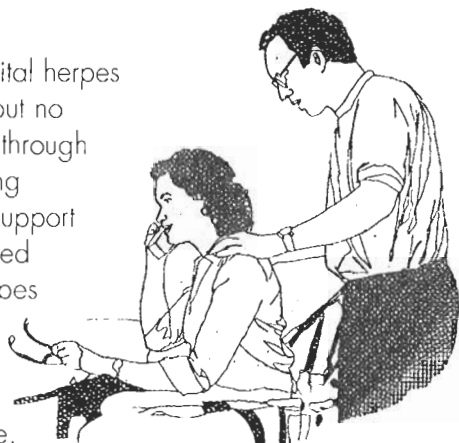
A Standard practice is to deliver the baby through a normal vaginal delivery unless there are signs or symptoms of an outbreak. In the case of an outbreak, a cesarean section is usually done.

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Seeking support and information

Dealing with genital herpes is no easy task, but no one needs to go through it alone. Reaching out to others for support and being informed about genital herpes may help you cope and put you back in control of your life.



Talking with your healthcare provider

It is important to find a healthcare provider you feel comfortable with. You want to select someone who listens to your concerns and who keeps you informed about your options. Here are some things that you can do when seeking care:

- Bring a list of questions to discuss with your healthcare provider
- Practice what you are going to say ahead of time
- Seek a second opinion if you are not satisfied with your present care

Talking with partners and friends

For many people, the most difficult part of having genital herpes is talking about it with their partners and friends. Talking with a counselor or support group can help you regain your sense of control and ability to live life fully and help you to discuss these issues with partners and friends. You can meet with a counselor one-on-one or within a support group. Support groups are available in person or on the Internet. Make sure you research them in advance to find the ones that are reputable.

Finding facts

In addition to talking to your healthcare provider and talking to others with genital herpes, you can find out more information by contacting national organizations, going on the Internet and reading books. The following is a listing of helpful resources.

National Organizations

American Social Health Association (ASHA)

The National Herpes Hotline
919-361-8488
www.ashastd.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

National STD and AIDS Hotlines
800-227-8922 or 800-342-2437 (English)
800-344-7432 (Spanish)
800-243-7889 (TTY)
www.cdc.gov

Planned Parenthood Federation of America

To locate a health center near you
800-230-7526
www.plannedparenthood.org

Chat Rooms

Herpes-related Yahoo! Clubs

<http://search.clubs.yahoo.com/search/clubs?p=herpes>

The Herpes News

<http://raccoon.com/theherpesnews/chats.html>

Note: Online public forums are not necessarily reliable sources of medical information. If you have questions about genital herpes, consult a healthcare provider.

Other Web Sites

HERPEShelp

www.herpeshelp.com

Healthy Lives

www.healthylives.com

All About Condoms (by Planned Parenthood)

www.plannedparenthood.org/bc/condom.htm

Free Trial Offer (for prescription herpes medication)

www.valtrex.com/consumer/freetrial.php

Books

Managing Herpes, How to Live and Love With a Chronic STD

by Charles Ebel
American Social Health Association, 1998

The Truth About Herpes

by Stephen L. Sacks, MD
Gordon Soules Book Publishers Ltd., 1997

There are other books available. Contact your local library or bookstore.

To learn more about genital herpes, check out www.herpeshelp.com

