

# Genital Herpes

## What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is a common disease caused by a virus. The virus is called the herpes simplex virus. It causes painful blisters that break open and form sores on the genitals of both men and women.

## How does it occur?

You can become infected with the virus by contact with broken blisters or sores on the genitals, mouth, or rectal area. This infection can be passed from person to person during sexual intercourse. You may spread it with your hands if the virus gets on your hands.

Once you're infected, the virus stays in your body for the rest of your life. Usually the virus is in an inactive state, which means it is staying in nerve cells near the spine and not causing symptoms. However, the virus may become active and cause sores again. The sores may come back often. Outbreaks of sores may occur with physical stress, such as tight clothing, sexual intercourse without enough lubrication, or other illnesses. Emotional stress or menstruation may also cause an outbreak. Most people with herpes have recurrent infections.

Herpes is highly contagious, especially when you have sores. It can be contagious even when you have no obvious sores or symptoms. It is important to remember that you can infect other people even when you do not have any blisters.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may occur about 2 to 10 days after the virus first enters your body and may include:

- painful sores (blisters) on the genitals (for example, a man's penis or the area around a woman's vagina), thighs, or buttocks
- fever (usually only with the first outbreak of blisters)
- general discomfort, muscle aches
- vaginal discharge
- pain when you urinate
- difficulty urinating
- pain during intercourse
- itching
- tender, enlarged lymph nodes in the groin.

The sores appear first as tiny clear blisters. The blisters usually quickly lose their thin tops. Then they look like small (1/8 inch to 1/4 inch wide), pink or red shallow sores. They are tender to the touch. Usually the blisters occur in groups of several blisters, but you may have just a single blister.

The symptoms of herpes are usually most severe during the first outbreak. Some people infected with herpes have no symptoms.

## How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask about your symptoms and examine you. Cells or liquid from one of the sores may be tested in the lab for the virus.

## How is it treated?

Genital herpes cannot be cured. The virus will stay in your body. However, your health care provider may prescribe acyclovir, famciclovir, or valacyclovir to relieve the symptoms more quickly. The medicine will help you have fewer and shorter outbreaks in the future. Even though you are taking the medicine, the infection will still be very contagious as long as you have sores, but the medicine will shorten the time of contagiousness. If you are pregnant, discuss the use of these medicines with your health care provider.

If a pregnant woman has an active herpes infection at the time her baby is born, she could pass the disease to her baby. If you are pregnant and have had herpes, tell your health care provider so steps can be taken to avoid infecting the baby at delivery. If you have an active herpes infection when you go into labor, your doctor may suggest a cesarean delivery.

## How long will the effects last?

The sores usually start to heal after about 5 days. They generally disappear in 1 to 3 weeks, but sometimes they may last for as long as 6 weeks. The sores rarely leave scars.

About half of herpes-infected people have recurrences. These recurrences tend to be milder than the first bout of herpes and the sores heal more quickly.

## How can I take care of myself while I have the active infection?

Follow the full treatment prescribed by your health care provider. In addition, when you have sores:

- Use a disposable glove to apply medication. This helps you avoid spreading the infection to other parts of your body with your hands.
- Wipe yourself from front to back after using the toilet.
- Wear loose clothing, preferably cotton, to allow circulation of air. It also helps avoid pressure on the skin, which may cause more blisters.
- Take aspirin, acetaminophen, or codeine to reduce pain.
- Avoid sharing towels or clothing.
- Avoid using douches, perfumed soaps, sprays, feminine hygiene deodorants, or other chemicals in the genital area.
- Avoid a lot of sunlight and heat, which may cause more blisters.
- Avoid sexual contact with others.

## What can I do to help prevent recurrences of herpes infection?

You may have recurrences less often if:

- You take all the medicine prescribed by your health care provider. Daily doses of acyclovir or another antiviral medicine may lessen the frequency of recurrent outbreaks of herpes sores and might prevent recurrences completely.
- You follow your health care provider's instructions for follow-up visits and tests.
- You tell your sexual partner or partners about the infection so they can be checked and treated, if necessary.

## What can be done to prevent infection with genital herpes?

- Practice safe sex. Use condoms every time you have intercourse, including during foreplay.
- Ask your partner(s) if they have had herpes because herpes may be spread from areas not protected by condoms; for example, the groin, thigh, and abdomen.
- Avoid oral-genital and oral-anal sex with someone who has fever blisters (cold sores) in the mouth. Cold sores are caused by a related virus that can infect the genitals.
- Always use condoms during any sexual contact, as it is not possible always to know or predict when the virus can be shed or passed to another. This includes oral-genital and anal-genital sex.

---

Published by McKesson Health Solutions LLC. This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional. Developed by Phyllis G. Cooper, R.N., M.N., and McKesson Health Solutions LLC. Copyright © 2003 McKesson Health Solutions LLC. All rights reserved.

Copyright © Clinical Reference Systems 2004 **Adult Health Advisor** Copyright © 2004 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. [www.mdconsult.com](http://www.mdconsult.com)