

Genital Herpes

Genital herpes is a **Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI)** caused by two types of viruses called herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) and herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2). Most people with genital herpes do not have any symptoms and are not aware that they have herpes. HSV-2 usually affects the genitals (vagina, penis, anus) and the surrounding skin causing blisters and open sores. HSV-1 affects the mouth, causing “fever blisters” and “cold sores”, but can also cause sores on the genitals through oral/genital contact. Genital herpes is common in the United States; about one in six adults age 17-49 are infected with HSV-2.

What are the symptoms of genital herpes?

- The first outbreak of genital herpes is usually the worst. A person may have swollen glands, fever, and body aches in addition to blisters or open sores. These sores may last 2-3 weeks, first “weeping”, then scabbing over, and then healing.
- Repeat outbreaks of herpes are common, especially during the first year after infection. Repeat outbreaks are usually shorter and less severe than the first outbreak. Some people have tingling or itching at the site of the sores before they appear.
- Although the herpes infection stays in your body the rest of your life, the number of outbreaks tends to decrease over a period of years. Repeat outbreaks of genital herpes caused by HSV-1 are less frequent than those caused by HSV-2.

How is herpes spread?

- You can get herpes by having oral, vaginal, or anal sex with someone who has herpes. Contact with the fluid from a herpes blister or sore can cause infection.
- Take care not to touch the fluid from the sores or the sores themselves. You may transfer the infection to another part of your body, including your eyes. Wash your hands carefully.
- Some people may never have symptoms but can infect partners during “asymptomatic shedding”. This is when virus can be released through your skin (usually from the vagina, penis, or anus) and can spread the infection to a partner.
- Condoms can help prevent the spread of herpes; however, outbreaks can occur in areas not covered by condoms. Not having sex when you or your partner is having symptoms helps decrease the chance of spreading herpes.

How is herpes diagnosed?

- Often your clinician can diagnose genital herpes by simply looking at your symptoms.
- If you have herpes blisters or sores, the clinician may take a sample from the sore and send it to the lab. The lab test can tell you if you have HSV-1 or HSV-2.
- The clinician may order a blood test that checks your blood for antibody to HSV-2. The test reports very accurate results at about 6-8 weeks after infection. The test cannot tell you when you were infected.

How is herpes treated?

- There is no cure for herpes but there are herpes medications that can prevent or shorten outbreaks. The medications work best if started early in the outbreak. Other medications like acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil) can help with discomfort. Warm baths may be helpful as well.

- If you get frequent outbreaks, herpes medications can be taken daily to prevent future outbreaks.
- Herpes medications can also be taken daily to reduce asymptomatic shedding, making it less likely that you will pass the infection on to a sexual partner.

Is Herpes serious?

- Herpes is seldom a serious condition. However, people with suppressed immune systems may have more serious, painful outbreaks.
- Having herpes will not prevent you from having a healthy baby. A pregnant woman who has herpes should tell her doctor so that steps can be taken to protect the baby's health.
- Having genital herpes increases your risk of acquiring HIV if you are exposed to HIV, and increases the risk of transmitting HIV if you have HIV.

How do I talk with a partner about herpes?

- Regardless of symptoms, having herpes may cause a person some distress. It can be helpful to talk with your health care provider or join a support group.
- We recommend discussing a herpes diagnosis with a prospective sex partner. Your partner would need to understand that it is possible for them to become infected even when using a condom.
- If you are in an established relationship, your partner may want to test for herpes as they may already be infected.

For more information:

Please talk with your City Clinic clinician or your own health care provider. The following websites also offer helpful information:

General STD

www.ashasexualhealth.org (also in Espanol)
www.cdc.gov/std/
www.sfcityclinic.org
www.sfsi.org/

Teens

www.iwannaknow.org
www.amplifyyourvoice.org (also in Espanol)
www.kidshealth.org/teen (also in Espanol)
www.scarleteen.com

Contraception and STD/sex info

www.bedsider.org

Herpes Info

www.bayareafriends.org
www.westoverheights.com/handbook
www.herpeseonline.org

Book

[The Good News about the Bad News](#) by Terri Warren

For a STD check-up or treatment,
see your doctor, local clinic, or come to:



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