

HERPES

Herpes is a very common and usually mild infection caused by the herpes simplex virus, or HSV. Herpes is caused by one of two viruses: herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) and herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2).

Most oral herpes cases are caused by HSV-1 and most genital herpes cases are caused by HSV-2. However, HSV-1 or HSV-2 can occur in either the genital or oral area.

Symptoms of Herpes

Some people with herpes don't have any symptoms. Many others have such mild symptoms that they may not recognize the infection for many years, if ever. This means many people who have herpes are unaware of their infection.

For those that do have symptoms, the first appearance of symptoms—called a first episode—is often the most noticeable. Symptoms vary greatly and may involve small pimples or blisters that crust over like a small cut. With the first episode, some people will have flu-like symptoms, including fever and swollen glands. On the other hand, some people have a first episode so mild they don't even notice it.

After that first infection, symptoms vary. When symptoms return—called a recurrence—some people notice so-called “classic” blisters, while others might have small bumps or sores. These can be found anywhere in the genital area, such as the thighs, buttocks or the anus. Symptoms are sometimes mistaken for jock itch, insect bites, yeast, or other conditions.

OVERVIEW

- Herpes is a common and usually mild infection caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV).
- HSV can cause cold sores on the mouth or face (called oral herpes) as well as symptoms around the genitals, butt and thighs (called genital herpes).
- While there is no cure for herpes, it can be treated. Treatment can help reduce the symptoms and also reduce the risk of passing the virus on to a sexual partner.

A day or two before lesions appear, many people have itching or tingling in the area where the lesions will develop. Such warning symptoms are called “prodrome.”

The number of recurrences a person has typically goes down over time. You may have a few the first year, and then find that the number of recurrences decreases each year after that. With genital HSV-1 infection, people are much less likely to have recurrent outbreaks.

Herpes Infection

Herpes is spread through direct skin-to-skin contact. For example, if you have a cold sore and kiss someone, you can transfer oral herpes from your mouth to theirs. If you

have active genital herpes you can transmit that through genital-to-genital contact, including vaginal and anal sex. Or if you have a cold sore and put your mouth on your partner's genitals (oral sex), you can give your partner genital herpes.

Herpes also can be spread through sexual contact at times when there are no obvious symptoms. There are days when the virus is on the skin without causing noticeable symptoms. This is called "asymptomatic shedding."

Getting Tested

When a person has active herpes lesions (a.k.a. blisters, sores), a swab can be taken and tests can be done that can detect the virus directly. The tests used include culture and Nucleic Acid Amplification Testing (NAAT). Both culture and NAAT tests can identify the specific herpes virus type someone is infected with, but NAAT methods are more sensitive. Culture can easily miss infections and give false negative results.

When there are no symptoms, blood tests can be done that detect specific HSV antibodies.

Treatment

While there is no cure for herpes simplex virus (HSV) infections, there are various treatment options available that can help manage symptoms and control outbreaks. Three prescription treatments are currently approved for genital herpes: acyclovir, valacyclovir, and famciclovir. All three drugs are similar in terms of how well they work. The major difference in these drugs—all of which are safe and have few side effects—is how often they must be taken.

- **Episodic Therapy:** This means taking the medicine during an outbreak to speed healing. A person begins taking the medicine at the first sign of prodrome and continues as prescribed.

- **Suppressive Therapy:** This involves taking medicine every day. Suppressive therapy greatly reduces the number of outbreaks for most people, and prevents symptoms altogether for some. It can also greatly reduce asymptomatic shedding. Taking valacyclovir daily has also shown to reduce the risk of herpes transmission to an uninfected partner.

Talking to a Partner

The best way for couples to deal with herpes is to talk about it openly and make decisions together. In the grand scheme of things, genital herpes is an inconvenience for most couples—nothing more than that. Remember to put herpes into perspective: it is an annoying, recurrent skin condition that is treatable and manageable—no more, no less. Check out the ASHA website at ashasexualhealth.org for more information on herpes to share.

Learn More

Learn more about herpes and other STIs from the American Sexual Health Association, a trusted nonprofit organization that has advocated on behalf of those at risk for STIs for more than a century. Our websites include:

www.ashasexualhealth.org
www.iwannaknow.org
www.quierosaber.org
www.nccc-online.org
www.askexpertsnow.com
www.YESmeansTEST.org

