

New York State Department of Health

Herpes II (genital herpes)

Last Reviewed: November 2006

What is herpes II?

Herpes II is a sexually transmitted viral infection, which often produces painful sores, usually in the genital area. Once infected, an individual may carry the virus and be subject to recurrent bouts of infection. Some estimate that as many as 20 percent of the adult population in the United States has been exposed to the virus.

Who gets herpes II?

Any person who has intimate sexual contact with an infected person can contract the infection. In addition, herpes II can be spread from an infected mother to her child during birth.

How is herpes II spread?

The herpes II virus is spread during sexual contact with an infected person who is secreting the virus in fluids from lesions or mucous membranes.

What are the symptoms of herpes II?

Typically, the first signs of herpes II is a cluster of blister-like lesions in the genital area (head of penis, labia, anus, cervix) which spread and merge, break and crust over within four to 15 days. The fluid from these itching, painful sores is highly infectious. Other frequent symptoms are painful urination, urethral or vaginal discharge and swollen lymph nodes. The first exposure or primary episode consists of headache, fever, chills and muscular weakness. Recurrent episodes are less severe and are limited to the affected area.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Some studies have shown that from one-half to two-thirds of people infected with the virus will have no symptoms. But, if they appear, local symptoms may be seen from two to 12 days after exposure.

When and for how long is a person able to spread herpes II?

People are most likely to transmit the virus when the lesions are evident. There is evidence, however, that the virus may be shed even when no symptoms of a recurrent episode are present.

Does past infection with herpes II make a person immune?

No. After the initial infection, the herpes II virus becomes dormant within the body. Symptoms may recur with varying frequency and are often associated with stress factors.

What is the treatment for herpes II?

Acyclovir, valacyclovir and famciclovir have been shown to reduce the shedding of herpes II virus, diminish pain and speed the healing of primary herpes lesions. In the oral form, this treatment also appears to shorten the duration of both primary and recurrent episodes.

What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of herpes II?

Avoidance of sexual contact with symptomatic individuals is an immediate, but only partial answer because herpes virus may be shed while the infected individual remains asymptomatic. Cesarean section is often recommended when primary or recurrent herpes II lesions occur in late pregnancy.

Sexual relations should be approached responsibly.

- Limit the number of your sex partners.
- Use a male or female condom.
- If you think you are infected, avoid any sexual contact and visit the local STD clinic, a hospital or your doctor.

Further Information

- [Wadsworth Center for Laboratories and Research](#)
- [Herpes Simplex Virus in Newborns](#)

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