

New York State Department of Health

Herpes

Last Reviewed: November 2006

What is herpes?

Herpes is one of the most common viral infections in the United States. One of every four Americans over 18 has been exposed to genital herpes. Most people don't know they're infected.

What causes herpes?

Herpes is a viral infection of the skin caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). There are two types of herpes: HSV-1 and HSV-2.

HSV-1 usually causes infections of the mouth such as "cold sores" or "fever blisters" on the lips. Most of the time HSV-2 causes genital herpes. But, either type of herpes can cause an infection of the mouth or genitals.

Herpes is spread by direct skin-to-skin contact with someone who is infected. You can get herpes from someone who has sores on his or her lips, skin or genitals. But, most of the time, herpes is spread when someone does not have any signs or symptoms. The herpes virus can still rub off a person's skin even when he or she has no sores that you can see.

Remember: you can get herpes from someone who has no sores or symptoms and if you have herpes you can spread it even if you have no sores or symptoms.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Only about half the people who get herpes have symptoms. Those who do have symptoms usually have an outbreak two to 10 days, or within three weeks, after they get the virus. The first symptoms are usually the worst. They are called primary herpes.

Signs and symptoms may include:

- A fever, headache, and muscle aches. Three days later, painful blisters and skin ulcers appear where you were infected. This may be your mouth, genital area, anus and/or rectum.
- Sores usually appear on both sides of the genitals during the first outbreak.
- Blisters may be "hidden" in your vagina.
- About a week after the skin rash, tender and swollen glands, or lymph nodes, may develop in your groin.

If you do not get treatment, your rash and pain will usually go away within three to four weeks.

Your sores will heal, but the virus will never go away. It will always stay in your body in a latent form. This means it will be quiet, hidden, and you will not have symptoms. But, herpes can become active again and cause new sores. This is called "recurrent" herpes.

- The second time you have symptoms, they will usually hurt less and not be as bad as the first time. Recurrent herpes often starts with a burning or itchy feeling one to two days before a skin rash begins.
- The sores of recurrent herpes usually appear on only one side of your genitals.

Can herpes cause any more problems?

The most severe problem (complication) happens when a woman passes the virus to her baby during delivery. If the infant is infected, it is very serious. This infection often causes the baby to die or suffer mental retardation and blindness. This problem is rare and usually happens when a woman gets herpes for the first time near delivery. If a woman has a genital herpes outbreak when she goes into labor, she may need a C-section (Cesarean delivery).

Urinating may be very painful if you have sores on your vulva (the external parts of the female genitals). You may be more comfortable if you sit in a tub of warm water and urinate into the bath water.

It is rare, but the first time you have herpes, it can cause the nerves to your bladder to become inflamed. If this happens, you will not be able to urinate. This is a temporary problem. You should see a health care provider for treatment.

How will I know if I have herpes?

If you have any sores, blisters, or red areas on your genitals your health care provider should examine you. He or she will swab the area to test for the virus. If you don't have any sores, a blood test can be done to see if you have ever been exposed to herpes.

Is there a cure?

No. Herpes is a chronic, lifelong infection. It will never go away. Even though there is no cure, antiviral medicines can help to:

- Treat the symptoms,
- Lower your chances of having an outbreak,
- Lower the number of times you shed the virus without knowing it, and
- Prevent you from having the symptoms again.

Medicines include:

- Acyclovir (ay sye' kloe veer) which is also called Zovirax;
- Famcyclovir (fam sye' kloe veer) also called Famvir, and
- Valacyclovir (val ay sye' kloe veer) or Valtrex.

These work best if you take them at the first sign of burning or itching, before the sores appear. Another way to take them is to take a small amount each day. Acyclovir is given to newborns who are infected during birth.

What about my partner(s)?

Because herpes is a sexually transmitted disease (STD), your sex partners should be checked for symptoms. Many partners do not have symptoms that can be seen or felt. But, your partners still need to be checked for infection and other STDs.

Since herpes is a lifelong infection, it is important to talk openly and honestly with your partners. If you'd like advice about how to talk to your partners, call one of the numbers at the end of this fact sheet.

When can I have sex again?

You should not have oral, vaginal or anal sex when you have sores. Also do not have any kind of sex if you think you might be getting an outbreak. Remember: you can pass the virus to your partners even when you

do not have symptoms.

You should tell your current and future partners that you have herpes.

How can I prevent herpes?

Not having sex (abstinence) is the only sure way to avoid infection.

To lower your chances of giving or getting herpes, use latex or polyurethane condoms every time you have oral, vaginal or anal sex. Using these condoms the right way each time you have sex can reduce your risk of genital herpes. Using condoms will not totally stop the risk of giving or getting herpes because this disease is spread through skin-to-skin contact from sores/ ulcers OR infected skin that may look normal. Condoms also help prevent the spread of other STDs including HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

If you are sexually active, you and your partners should get a full physical checkup. This includes a complete sexual history and testing for common STDs. You should be checked for gonorrhea, chlamydia, syphilis, herpes, genital warts, trichomoniasis, and HIV.

Will anyone know the results of the exams?

Your test results and any treatment will be kept ***absolutely confidential***. No one can find out your results, except you. If you are under 18 you can be checked and treated for STDs without getting permission from your parents.

To learn more:

If you have more questions about herpes, or you want to know how to find a clinic near you, call your local health department. You may also call the Herpes Hotline at: 1-919-361-8488. You can reach them from 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. Monday to Friday. Your local Planned Parenthood office also has information about local herpes support groups.

You may also call the National STD Hotline at 1-800-CDC-INFO 1-800-232-4636.

Questions or comments: stdc@health.state.ny.us

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