

# HERPES, GENITAL



## BASIC INFORMATION

### DESCRIPTION

An infection caused by one of two types of herpes simplex virus (HSV). Herpes type 2 virus (HSV-2) is the usual cause of genital herpes. Herpes type 1 virus (HSV-1) causes common cold sores around the mouth, but can also cause genital herpes. Genital herpes can affect any sexually active male or female.

### FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- No symptoms may occur or they may not be noticed. A person may not realize they are infected.
- Early symptoms may include itching or burning in the genital or anal area. This may be followed by pain. Women may have vaginal discharge.
- Within a few days, sores appear in the vaginal area, on the penis, around the anal opening, on the buttocks, thighs, or the mouth. The sores start as red bumps, then turn into a cluster of blisters, that open and cause pain. They then crust over and heal. There is no scarring.
- First episode may include a general ill feeling, difficult and painful urination, swollen lymph glands, and fever.
- Symptoms can recur since the virus permanently remains in the body. Future outbreaks may be milder. They may occur several times a year in some, but others may have only one or two outbreaks in a lifetime.

### CAUSES

Having sex (intercourse or oral sex) with someone who is having a herpes outbreak. An outbreak means that HSV is active and usually causes visible sores in the genital area. The sores shed the virus that can infect another person. In some cases, a person may have an outbreak with no visible sores. They can still shed the virus and infect the other person.

### RISK INCREASES WITH

Anyone who is sexually active.

### PREVENTIVE MEASURES

Avoid sexual intercourse, oral or anal sex, or skin-to-skin contact if either partner has blisters or sores. Use a latex (rubber) condom during intercourse if either sex partner has inactive genital herpes.

### EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Genital herpes cannot be cured. During symptom-free periods, the virus returns to its dormant (inactive) state. Symptoms recur when the virus is reactivated. The symptoms vary from person to person and from time to time in the same person. Symptoms and recurrence can be relieved with treatment.

### POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

Complications are rare in otherwise healthy persons. A person with a weak immune system may have more severe and prolonged outbreaks.



## DIAGNOSIS & TREATMENT

### GENERAL MEASURES

- Your health care provider can usually diagnose the disorder by an exam of the affected area. Medical tests may include blood studies or studies of fluid taken from the sores.
- Treatment goals are to relieve the symptoms and prevent recurrences. Treatment steps may include drugs and self-care.
- For self-care, keep the affected area clean and dry. Avoid touching the sores, but if you do, wash your hands right away. Warm baths with a tablespoon of salt added can ease some of the discomfort.
- Certain "triggers" can lead to outbreaks. They include skin friction, sex, stress, sunlight/sunburn, wind, fever, surgery, menstruation, infection, and some drugs. A person will begin to recognize their triggers and take steps to avoid them.
- Consider counseling for problems of emotional stress.
- If you are pregnant and have herpes, be sure to advise your obstetric provider so any safeguards can be taken.
- Women should have an annual pelvic exam and Pap smear.
- To learn more: Herpes Resource Center, P.O. Box 13827, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709; hotline (919) 361-8488 (not toll-free); website: [www.ashastd.org/hrc](http://www.ashastd.org/hrc).

### MEDICATIONS

Antiviral drugs in oral form are often prescribed for treatment and prevention of outbreaks. A topical form is available, but it is not as effective.

### ACTIVITY

- No limits on daily activities.
- Avoid sexual relations until symptoms disappear.

### DIET

No special diet.



## NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member has symptoms of genital herpes.
- Symptoms don't improve in 1 week, despite treatment.

Special notes:

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More notes on the back of this page