

Genital Ulcers: What Causes Them?

What are genital ulcers?

They are sores usually found on the vagina or penis. They can also be found in the anus or on the skin around it. They sometimes hurt or leak fluid.

What causes them?

They are usually caused by sexually transmitted infections, or STIs. These include herpes, syphilis, and chancroid. Genital ulcers may also be caused by inflammatory diseases, trauma, or a bad reaction to skin care products.

Who can get genital ulcers?

Risk factors for genital ulcers are the same as those for STIs. They include unprotected sex, lack of male circumcision, and more than one sex partner. Genital ulcers caused by inflammatory diseases may run in families.

How can I lower my risk?

If you have sex, use a condom or dental dam. Although this decreases the risk, it is possible to get STIs from infected skin not covered by the condom or dental dam.

How do I know if I have genital ulcers?

Genital ulcers may show up in different ways. They sometimes start out as bumps or a rash and may or may not hurt. You may also have swollen glands in the groin area or a fever. Your doctor can test the area to see if you have an STI.

How are they treated?

Treatment depends on the cause of the ulcers. STIs are usually treated with antibiotic or antiviral pills or shots. If you have an inflammatory disease, you may need a shot or ointment to put on the ulcers. Some genital ulcers go away on their own, but may still lead to more serious infection. Your doctor may only treat your pain or take care of the wound, but testing for STI is usually needed.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

American Social Health Association

Web site: http://www.ashastd.org/learn/learn_testing.cfm

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Web sites: <http://www.cdc.gov/std/treatment/2010/genital-ulcers.htm>, <http://www.cdc.gov/std/Herpes/default.htm>, <http://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/default.htm>

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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