

Genital Herpes: What You Should Know

What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes (HER-pees) is a disease caused by a virus called herpes simplex. It may cause painful blisters on the thighs, buttocks, or genitals. The blisters break open and turn into sores. The virus can also cause fever blisters or cold sores around the mouth. Once you get herpes, the virus stays in your body for the rest of your life. When sores form, it is called an outbreak. You can get outbreaks often or only once in a while. Some people never have another outbreak after the first outbreak heals.

About one in six people between the ages of 15 and 50 years has genital herpes, although most do not know they have it. Even if they do not have symptoms, people can still pass the infection through close oral or genital contact.

Who gets it?

Anyone can get genital herpes. It is spread by close contact with someone who has herpes. You can get it from having oral sex with someone who has cold sores. Herpes can also be spread from one part of your body to another. For example, you can spread it from your genitals to your fingers, then to your eyes or open wounds on your body or on your partner's body. It also can be spread from a mother to her baby when she gives birth.

If you have herpes, you can spread the virus to other people whether or not you have open sores. There is no way to know when or how often your body sheds the virus.

How can I tell if I have it?

Herpes sores usually form around the genital area a few days after you have contact with someone who has the virus. The sores start as tiny blisters. When they break open, they form pink or red sores. These sores crust over and heal within two to 12 days. The blisters are often in clusters, but you may have just one. You might have a fever, muscle aches, and sore lymph nodes in the groin. Herpes sores can cause vaginal discharge in women. Men and women may have trouble urinating.

If you think you might have herpes, you should see your doctor for testing and medicine.

How is it treated?

Genital herpes cannot be cured, but outbreaks can be treated. Your doctor can give you medicines to make the sores go away more quickly and to reduce the number of outbreaks.

When you have herpes sores, you should wear loose clothing and keep the genital area clean and dry. Try not to touch the sores. If you do touch them, wash your hands with soap



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and water right away because the virus can be passed with your fingers.

How often will I have outbreaks?

Most people with herpes will have some outbreaks, but they may be so mild that you do not know you have one. You may think the herpes outbreak is irritation from clothing, a minor injury, or a yeast or bladder infection. Outbreaks after the first one tend to be milder, and sores heal faster.

How can I prevent genital herpes?

People who have herpes can pass the virus from oral or genital contact even when they do not have sores. Males should use latex condoms every time they have sex to lower the risk of getting genital herpes. However, it does not completely remove the risk. You should not have sex with someone who has active sores, even with a condom.

Ask your partner if he or she has ever had a herpes infection. If your partner has had herpes, you should see your doctor for information to help prevent you from getting it.

Do not have oral sex, kiss, or share cups, glasses, or lip balm with someone who currently has, or has recently had, cold sores.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Education Resource

<http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/diseases-conditions/herpes.html>

American Sexual Health Association

<http://www.ashastd.org>

<http://www.ashasexualhealth.org/stdsstis/herpes/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<http://www.cdc.gov/std/Herpes/STDFact-Herpes.htm>

National Herpes Hotline and STD Hotline

1-919-361-8488 and 1-800-227-8922

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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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