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The National Women's Health Information Center

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Frequently Asked Questions about Genital Herpes

What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is an infection caused by the *herpes simplex virus* (HSV). There are two types of HSV, and both can cause the symptoms of genital herpes. HSV type 1 most commonly causes sores on the lips (fever blisters or cold sores), but it can cause genital infections as well. HSV type 2 most often causes genital sores, but it can also infect the mouth. However, many people who are infected with HSV never have symptoms.

Genital herpes is a *sexually transmitted disease* (STD). This means that it is a disease that you get by having sex with someone who already has the virus. Once you are infected, the virus stays in your body for life. You may or may not have a first episode or “outbreak” of herpes with symptoms. But if you do have a first outbreak, you will probably have further outbreaks from time to time. You can give herpes to another person if you have sex when your herpes virus is active.

If you have herpes, you are also more likely to get HIV (the AIDS virus) if exposed to it. An estimated 45 million Americans have genital herpes, and there are up to one million new cases each year.

What are the symptoms of genital herpes?

The symptoms of genital herpes vary widely from person to person. Some people have severe symptoms (such as many painful sores), while others have mild symptoms. When symptoms of a first episode of genital herpes occur, they show up two to ten days after having sex with an infected person. These signs can last from two to three weeks. The early symptoms can include an itching or burning sensation; pain in the legs, buttocks, or genital area; vaginal discharge; or a feeling of pressure in the abdominal region.

Within a few days, sores (also called lesions) appear at the site of infection. Lesions can also occur on the *cervix* (opening to the uterus, or womb) in women or in the urinary passage in men. These small red bumps may develop into blisters or painful open sores. Over a period of days, the sores become crusted and then heal without scarring. Other symptoms of a first episode of genital herpes can include fever, headache, muscle aches, painful or difficult urination, vaginal discharge, and swollen glands in the groin area.

The symptoms of genital herpes may include:

- Small red bumps on the penis, vagina, or wherever the infection began. These bumps may become blisters or painful open sores.
- Itching or burning in the genital area.
- Pain in the legs, buttocks, or genital area.
- Vaginal discharge.

- Feeling pressure or discomfort around your stomach.
- Fever.
- Headache.
- Muscle aches.
- Pain when urinating.
- Swollen glands in the genital area.

Can genital herpes recur?

Yes. Herpes can come back. It stays in the nerve cells of your body, even after all signs of the infection have gone away. In most people, the virus becomes active from time to time. This is called a recurrence or an outbreak of genital herpes. In an outbreak, the virus travels along the nerves to the skin. The virus can then multiply and be passed to other people, even if there is no obvious sore or lesion.

Some people have herpes virus outbreaks only once or twice in their lives. Other people have many outbreaks of herpes each year. Scientists don't know what causes the virus to come back. Some women say the virus comes back when they are sick, under stress, out in the sun, or during their period.

How is genital herpes diagnosed?

Besides observing visible sores or lesions, a health care provider may use laboratory tests to check for the virus. A sample from a lesion can be tested. Blood tests can also be done. However, the tests do not always identify the virus, even though it is present.

What is the treatment for genital herpes?

Genital herpes is usually treated with antiviral drugs such as *acyclovir* and *valacyclovir*. Acyclovir can be taken the first time you get herpes and during later outbreaks of the virus. Other drugs can be used for later outbreaks. If taken within 24 hours after symptoms begin, acyclovir makes the herpes outbreaks shorter and less severe. People who have many outbreaks can also take oral acyclovir daily for up to one year. This can help keep the virus in an inactive state and prevent most outbreaks. But acyclovir does not cure genital herpes.

Here are some tips for active herpes outbreaks. These steps can speed healing and prevent spreading the infection to other sites of the body or to other people.

- Keep the infected area clean and dry.
- Try to avoid touching the sores.
- Wash hands after contact.
- Avoid sexual contact from the time the symptoms are first recognized until the sores have healed.

Is there a cure for genital herpes?

No. Once you have the virus, it stays in your body and there is a chance that you will have outbreaks. But medicine can shorten and prevent outbreaks.

Are there any complications of genital herpes during pregnancy?

Yes. A pregnant woman with genital herpes can pass the virus to her baby during delivery. If the mother is having her first outbreak at the time of a vaginal birth, the baby's risk of infection is approximately one in three. If the outbreak is a recurrence, the baby's risk is very low. Babies born with herpes may have brain damage, severe rashes, eye problems, or they may die. Doctors will do a c-section to deliver a baby if the mother has herpes near the birth canal. Also, acyclovir can help babies born with herpes if they are treated right away.

What can I do to prevent genital herpes?

There are things you can do to protect yourself from getting genital herpes:

- The best way to prevent genital herpes or any STD is to practice abstinence (don't have sex). Delaying having sex for the first time is another way to reduce your chances of getting an STD. Studies show that the younger people are when having sex for the first time, the more likely it is that they will get an STD. The risk of getting an STD also becomes greater over time, as the number of a person's sex partners increases.
- Have a sexual relationship with one partner who doesn't have any STDs, where you are faithful to each other (meaning that you only have sex with each other and no one else).
- Practice "safer sex." This means protecting yourself with a condom EVERY time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex.

For vaginal sex, use a latex male condom or a female polyurethane condom. For anal sex, use a latex male condom. If needed, use only water based lubricants with male and female condoms. For oral sex, use a *dental dam* – a device used by dentists, made out of a rubbery material, that you place over the opening to the vagina before having oral sex. If you don't have a dental dam, you can cut an unlubricated male condom open and place it over the opening to the vagina.

Even though it may be embarrassing, if you don't know how to use a male or female condom, talk to your health care provider. The biggest reason condoms don't work is because they are not used correctly.

- Be aware that condoms don't provide complete protection against STDs. But, they do decrease your chances of getting an STD. Know also that other methods of birth control, like birth control pills, shots, implants, or diaphragms don't protect you from STDs. If you use one of these methods, be sure to also use a condom every time you have sex.
- Limit your number of sexual partners. Your risk of getting genital herpes increases with the number of partners you have.

- Don't douche. Douching removes some of the normal bacteria in the vagina that protects you from infection. This can increase your risk for getting genital herpes.
- Learn how to talk with your partner about STDs and using condoms. It's up to you to make sure you are protected. The organizations in the "For more information" at the end of this FAQ have tips for talking with your partner. You can also talk with your health care provider about this.
- When you are sexually active, especially if you have more than one partner, get regular exams for STDs from a health care provider. Tests for STDs can be done during an exam. And, the earlier an STD is found, the easier it is to treat.
- Learn the common symptoms of genital herpes and other STDs. Seek medical help right away if you think you may have genital herpes or another STD.

What should I do if I have genital herpes?

Sometimes a person may be too scared or embarrassed to ask for information or help. But, keep in mind most STDs are easy to treat. Early treatment of STDs is important. The quicker you seek treatment, the less likely the STD will cause you severe harm. And the sooner you tell your sex partners about having an STD, the less likely they are to spread the disease to others (because they can get treated).

Doctors, local health departments, and STD and family planning clinics have information about STDs. The American Social Health Association (ASHA) has free information and keeps lists of clinics and doctors who provide treatment for STDs. Call ASHA at (800) 227-8922. You can get information from the phone line without leaving your name.

If you have genital herpes:

- Get it treated right away. Studies suggest that having an STD increases your risk for getting infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.
- Follow your health care provider's orders and finish all the medicine that you are given. Even if the symptoms go away, you still need to finish all of the medicine.
- Avoid having any sexual activity while you are being treated for genital herpes.
- Be sure to tell your sexual partners, so they can be tested.
- Remember that genital herpes is a life long disease. Even though you may have long periods with no symptoms, you can still pass the virus to another person. Talk with your health care provider (and see the above question) about what you can do to lower your risk for both recurrences of genital herpes, and for passing the virus to another person.

For more information...

For more information, call the National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

National Prevention Information Network

Phone Number(s): (800) 458-5231

Internet Address: <http://www.cdcnpin.org>

CDC National STD and AIDS Hotline

Phone Number(s): (800) 227-8922

Internet Address: <http://www.ashastd.org/NSTD/index.html>

National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention

Internet Address: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/od/nchstp.html>

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

Phone Number(s): (301) 496-5717

Internet Address: <http://www.niaid.nih.gov>

American Social Health Association

Phone Number(s): (800) 783-9877

Internet Address: <http://www.ashastd.org>

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

Phone Number(s): (800) 762-2264

Internet Address: <http://www.acog.org>

American Academy of Family Physicians

Phone Number(s): (913) 906-6000

Internet Address: <http://www.familydoctor.org>

Planned Parenthood Federation of America

Phone Number(s) (800) 230-7526

Internet Address: <http://www.plannedparenthood.org>

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*This FAQ has been reviewed by Carol Langford, M.D., of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, National Institutes of Health
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