



# Genital Herpes

## What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is an infection that you get from someone else by having vaginal, oral, or anal sex. About 1 out of 6 people have genital herpes. Herpes is caused by a virus called herpes simplex virus (HSV). Once you get HSV, the virus stays in your body for the rest of your life.

There are 2 types of HSV.

- Herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) usually causes sores in or around the mouth or lips. These are called cold sores. Almost all cold sores are caused by HSV-1.
- Herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2) usually causes sores in the genital area on the vulva (area around the opening to your vagina), penis, or anus. HSV-2 can also cause sores in the vagina. Some genital herpes infections are caused by HSV-1.

## What are the symptoms of genital herpes?

Most people who have herpes do not know they have this infection because they have no symptoms or very mild symptoms. Some people who have genital herpes get sores that can cause pain, burning, tingling, or itching. Herpes sores start as one or more blisters on the skin. The blisters break open and leave an open sore. The sores may be very small or as large as one inch across. The skin around the sores may be red, swollen, and warmer than your other skin. Herpes sores can be very painful. Some people with herpes will feel burning, itching, or tingling in the area where the sore is going to be a few days before they have the sore. These are called prodromal symptoms.

## What is a genital herpes outbreak?

Any time you get a herpes sore, this is called a herpes outbreak. The first time you have an outbreak you may feel sick like you have the flu. You can have fever, body aches, pain when you urinate, and swollen glands in your groin area.

Although herpes is a lifelong infection, some people will only have one outbreak. Others will have more outbreaks after the first one. This is called recurrent herpes. Most people with recurrent outbreaks have a few per year. Some people have more than that, and some have less. Usually, people with recurrent herpes have outbreaks less often as the years go by.

## How do I know if I have genital herpes?

Your health care provider may be able to tell if a sore is herpes by just looking at it. A cotton swab can also be used to collect some of the fluid in the sore. This sample is tested to see if HSV is present. This test works better if the sores have just appeared within the last few days. Call your health care provider as soon as possible if you think you have a herpes sore. If you are worried you have herpes without any symptoms, a blood test for herpes can be done. The blood test does not tell you who you got herpes from or how long you have had herpes.

## How is genital herpes treated?

Antiviral medicine can help during outbreaks and between outbreaks. Antiviral pills for genital herpes are oral (go in your mouth). Antiviral pills are recommended for everyone with a first herpes outbreak. If you have repeat outbreaks, you can choose how often you take antiviral pills:

- Episodic therapy is when you take antiviral pills when you first feel prodromal symptoms or notice a sore. Episodic therapy can make the sores go away faster and make the outbreak less painful. Taking over-the-



counter pain relievers like acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil), soaking in warm water, and wearing loose clothing can also help make the outbreak less painful.

- Suppressive therapy is when you take antiviral pills every day to prevent outbreaks. If you stop taking the pills, you may start having outbreaks again.
- Talk with your health care provider to see if taking antiviral pills is right for you.

### **How is herpes spread from one person to another?**

Herpes is spread by skin-to-skin contact with a herpes sore or the genital area, mouth, or anus of a person who has the virus. People who have herpes are most likely to spread the virus when they have prodromal symptoms or a sore. People who have herpes can spread the virus even when they do not have any symptoms.

### **How can I keep from getting herpes?**

The only way to make sure you never get genital herpes is to not have sex with another person. There is no vaccine to keep you from getting herpes. If you are having sex, you can lower your chance of getting herpes by only having sex with one person who agrees to only have sex with you. Using a condom or dental dam every time you have vaginal, oral, or anal sex will also help prevent herpes. Do not have sex with a partner who you know or think has herpes during your last 3 months of pregnancy. You or your partner might have herpes but have no symptoms. You and your partner can get a blood test for herpes before you start having sex.

### **If my sex partner or I have herpes, how can we keep it from spreading?**

Being open and honest with your sex partner about having herpes is very important. If a person who has herpes takes antiviral pills every day, their chance of spreading the virus is much lower. Do not have sex when you or your partner has prodromal symptoms or herpes sores.

### **What if I am pregnant and have genital herpes?**

Your baby will not get herpes during pregnancy. If you have herpes and have a herpes outbreak near the vagina during the birth, there is a very low chance your baby will get herpes during birth. The chance your baby will get herpes is much higher if you have your first herpes outbreak around the time of birth. Your health care provider may recommend you take antiviral pills near your due date to prevent a recurrent outbreak. Cesarean birth may be recommended if you have a herpes sore or prodromal symptoms when you go into labor.

#### **For More Information**

##### **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**

<https://www.cdc.gov/std/herpes/stdfact-herpes.htm>

##### **American Sexual Health Association**

<https://www.ashasexualhealth.org/herpes/>

##### **Office on Women's Health**

<https://www.womenshealth.gov/a-z-topics/genital-herpes>

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