

Fact Sheet

GENITAL HERPES

What is it?

Genital Herpes is a Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI). It can be caused by HSV-1 or HSV-2. HSV-1 is the virus that causes cold sores. HSV-1 can also infect the genitals through oral sex. HSV-2 infects the genital area.

What are the symptoms?

Most people who get herpes either have no symptoms or are unable to recognize their symptoms as herpes. However, you may notice a sore or sores 2 to 21 days after skin-to-skin contact with an infected person anywhere in the “boxer short” area. Sometimes, the first outbreak is quite painful. Blisters (sores) may appear (on the vulva, inside the vagina, on the penis, scrotum, thighs, buttocks or anus). There may be fever, pain in the joints, flu-like symptoms, painful urination, itching or tingling, and enlarged and tender lymph nodes.

People may have one blister or more. It may take two to three weeks for the sores to go away. Some people have monthly outbreaks; some every few months; and about 10% never have another one. Between outbreaks, the virus stays in the body. For some people there are triggers to these outbreaks: stress, menstruation or exposure to extreme heat, cold or sunlight. Some people get more outbreaks because they are unable to keep their immune system strong with a balanced diet, exercise and sleep. For others, outbreaks just seem to come at any time.

How does it spread?

Herpes is spread by skin-to-skin contact and contact with oral and genital fluids.

With oral sex

- easy to pass HSV-1 to the genitals
- hard to get HSV-2 on the mouth

With genital contact

- hard to get HSV-1
- easy to get HSV-2

Herpes can be spread to other parts of the body (including the eye). Wash and dry your hands carefully if you touch herpes sores. Do not kiss or have oral sex with anyone if there are sores in or near the mouth.

In the first year after infection, it is common for the body to “shed” virus when there are no sores. This means that the virus can be transmitted to another person from skin-to-skin contact, even if they never had symptoms that they recognize as genital herpes.

Women who have had genital herpes can still get pregnant, have a healthy pregnancy and a healthy baby. She will not necessarily need to have a C-section. However, if she has had genital herpes, she should talk with her doctor or midwife about how to reduce the risk to her baby during delivery.

(please turn over)

Fact Sheet

How is it diagnosed?

If a person has symptoms, a doctor can swab the blister(s) and send the fluid to the laboratory. Often doctors diagnose herpes by recognizing the symptoms.

Is there a treatment?

There is treatment but no cure. Treatment works best when you take it in the first 48 hours after an outbreak. It can help the sores to heal more quickly. Medication can also help keep your partner(s) from getting it.

Here are some things you can do to feel better:

- Keep the sores clean by washing with mild soap.
- Try to air the sores and keep them dry.
- Use a hair dryer set on low to dry sores that are sensitive.
- Apply an ice pack to the sore(s).
- Wear loose fitting clothing and cotton underwear.
- If urinating is painful, do it in the shower or in a warm bath.
- Don't use creams unless they are prescribed by the doctor

Here are some things you can do to prevent another outbreak:

- Do not sunbathe or sit under a sun lamp.
- Try to keep your immune system healthy by eating healthy food and getting enough sleep and exercise.
- Be sure to wash your hands well after touching sores to avoid infecting other parts of your body.

What about sexual partners?

You need to tell your sexual partner(s) before you have sexual contact. Condoms are good protection for the parts that are covered. If you feel tingling or itching where you had a sore before, this may mean you are going to have an outbreak. When you have symptoms or sores, avoid any sexual contact until the sore(s) are completely healed and the tingling or itching goes away. Healed skin means the scab has fallen off and the skin looks normal. Avoid oral sex when you have a cold sore.

Follow-up

A person may get genital herpes more than once. After the first time, the sores are usually less painful and heal faster than with the first outbreak. You may want to consider medication.

**For more information
call the AIDS and Sexual Health InfoLine at 416-392-2437**

April 2009