



Genital Herpes

Genital herpes is a viral infection that can be spread through sexual contact. At least 50 million people in the United States—about one in six adults—are infected with the herpes virus. Genital herpes is more common in women than in men. There is no cure, but the infection can be managed.

This pamphlet explains

- *herpes simplex virus*
- *how infection with the herpes virus occurs*
- *symptoms, diagnosis, and management of genital herpes*
- *how to live with genital herpes and avoid passing it to others*
- *genital herpes and pregnancy*

Herpes Simplex Virus

Genital herpes is a **sexually transmitted infection (STI)**. It is caused by a virus called herpes simplex virus (HSV). There are two types of HSV that can cause genital herpes: 1) HSV-1 and 2) HSV-2. The most common cause of genital herpes is HSV-2. HSV-1 usually causes cold sores that appear on the mouth, lips, and eyes, but it is becoming more common as a cause of genital herpes, especially in young women.

How Infection Occurs

Infection with HSV can cause painful sores and blisters around the lips, genitals, or anus. Sometimes, infection with HSV causes no sores. It is possible to have HSV and not know it.

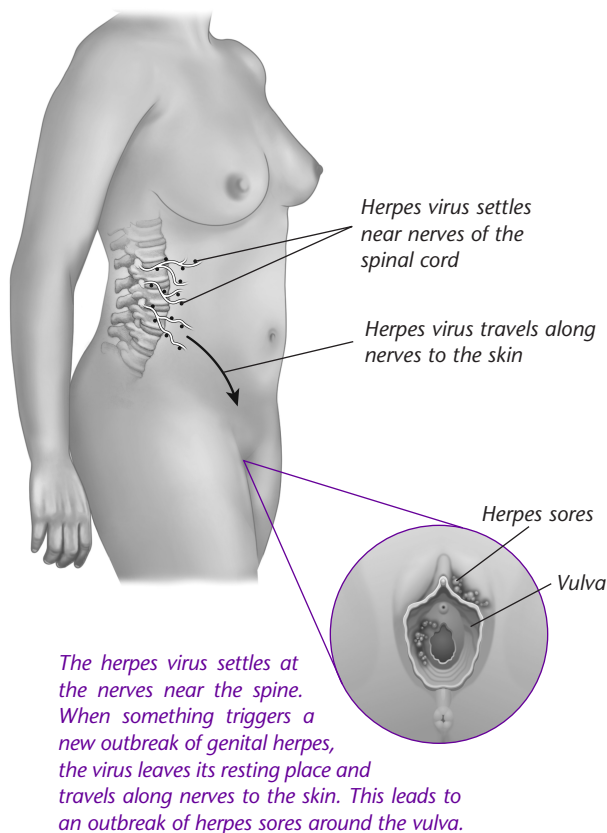
HSV is spread through direct contact with these sores, usually during vaginal, oral, or anal sex. HSV also can be present on the skin even if there are no

sores. If a person comes into contact with the virus on an infected person's skin, he or she can become infected.

After a person is first infected, HSV stays in the body. It travels to nerve cells near the spine and stays there until something triggers it to become active again. When this happens, the virus then travels along the nerves, back to where it first entered the body, and causes a new outbreak of sores and blisters. This is called a recurrence. The virus can be passed to others during a recurrence.

Symptoms

Many people infected with HSV have no symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they vary with each person. Some people have painful outbreaks with many sores. Others have only mild symptoms that may go unnoticed.



First Outbreak

When a person is first infected with HSV, symptoms appear about 2–10 days after the virus enters the body. At first, there may be flu-like symptoms, such as fever, chills, muscle aches, fatigue, and nausea. Sores may appear as small, fluid-filled blisters on the genitals, buttocks, or other areas. The sores often are grouped in clusters, and the area where the sores appear may be swollen and tender. If sores are on the genitals, a stinging or burning feeling while urinating is common.

The first outbreak of genital herpes may last 2–4 weeks. During this time, the sores break open and release fluid. Over a period of days, the sores become crusted and then heal without leaving scars.

Recurrences

When an outbreak is about to happen again, there may be burning, itching, or tingling near where the virus first

Self-Care During a Herpes Outbreak

The following tips may help relieve some of the discomfort of herpes:

- Keep the lesions clean and dry.
- Wear loose-fitting cotton underclothes and avoid pantyhose. Nylon and other synthetics hold in heat and moisture, which may slow the healing process.
- Take an over-the-counter pain reliever.

entered the body. Pain may be felt in the lower back, buttocks, thighs, or knees. This is called a **prodrome**. A few hours later, sores may appear. In recurrent outbreaks, there usually is no fever or swelling in the genital area. Sores heal more quickly—within 3–7 days in most cases. Also, recurrent outbreaks usually are less painful. Outbreaks usually are most frequent in the first year after infection. For many people, the number of outbreaks decreases over time.

HSV can be present on the skin right before and right after an outbreak. At these times, an infected person is said to “shed” the virus. The virus can be spread to others at this time, even when the skin looks normal.

Diagnosis

Laboratory tests are needed to diagnose genital herpes. If sores are present, a sample of fluid is taken from a sore. The sample is tested to see if it contains the virus and, if so, what type of HSV it is. A blood test also can help diagnose HSV. The test looks for **antibodies** that the body creates to fight the virus. The blood test can show the type of HSV, but it cannot tell how you got the infection or how long you have been infected.

Management

There is no cure for genital herpes, but the condition can be managed. Antiviral medications taken during an outbreak can shorten the length and severity of the outbreak. When taken on a daily basis, antiviral medications can reduce the number of outbreaks. This is called suppressive therapy. In some cases, suppressive therapy can prevent outbreaks for a long time. It also reduces the risk of giving herpes to someone else.

Living With Genital Herpes

If you have genital herpes, you need to take steps to avoid passing HSV to your sexual partners:

- Tell current sexual partners that you have genital herpes. Even if your partners do not have sores, they may want to be tested. The blood test for herpes can be done when no sores are present. You also should tell future partners before having sexual contact.
- It is possible to pass HSV to someone else even when you do not have sores. The virus can be present on skin that looks normal. Using male latex condoms (or polyurethane for those allergic to latex) may reduce your risk of passing or getting HSV, but they do not provide complete protection. Areas of skin that have the virus but are not covered by the condom can spread the infection. Suppressive therapy can reduce the risk of passing the infection to a partner.
- Be alert to the prodromal symptoms that signal an outbreak coming on. Avoid sexual contact from the time you feel these symptoms coming on until a

few days after the scabs have gone away. Wash your hands with soap and water after any possible contact with sores. This will keep you from reinfecting yourself or passing the virus to someone else.

- People with HSV-2 infection have an increased risk of getting **human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)** if they have sex with an HIV-infected partner. Taking suppressive therapy does not decrease this risk.

Genital Herpes and Pregnancy

Herpes infection can cause serious illness in newborns. Herpes can damage a baby's brain and eyes. If a woman is pregnant and infected with HSV, it can be passed to the baby during birth when he or she passes through the woman's infected birth canal. This is most likely to occur if a woman first becomes infected with HSV during pregnancy and in a woman who has her first outbreak late in pregnancy. But it also can occur during a recurrent outbreak in a woman who was infected before pregnancy, although the risk is much lower.

If you are infected with HSV for the first time during pregnancy, you can be prescribed antiviral medication to reduce the severity of symptoms and the length of the outbreak. If you have had outbreaks before, you can take antiviral medication during the last several weeks of pregnancy to help reduce the risk of an outbreak at the time of delivery and prevent infection in the baby.

If you have sores or warning signs of an outbreak at the time of delivery, you may need to have a **cesarean delivery**. A cesarean delivery can reduce the chance of the baby getting infected. The decision depends on many factors, including where the sores are on your body and whether the baby would come into contact with them during delivery.

In most cases, you can still breastfeed your baby if you have genital herpes. The herpes virus cannot be passed to a baby through breast milk. However, the baby could get infected by touching a sore on your body. Make sure any sores that the baby could come into contact with are covered when you hold your baby or while breastfeeding. Wash your hands with soap and water before and after feeding your baby. If you have sores on your breast, you should not breastfeed your baby from that breast.

Finally...

Herpes affects millions of people in the United States. It can be a source of concern and discomfort. Simple measures can ease the symptoms of herpes, and medication can promote healing. Over time, most people with herpes find ways to cope with the infection.

Glossary

Antibodies: Proteins in the blood that the body makes in reaction to foreign substances, such as bacteria and viruses.

Cesarean Delivery: Delivery of a fetus from the uterus through an incision made in the woman's abdomen.

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV): A virus that attacks certain cells of the body's immune system. If left untreated, HIV can cause acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).

Prodrome: A symptom that starts before the onset of a disease.

Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI): An infection that is spread by sexual contact. Infections include chlamydia, gonorrhea, human papillomavirus (HPV), herpes, syphilis, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV, the cause of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome [AIDS]).

This information was designed as an educational aid to patients and sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. It is not intended as a statement of the standard of care, nor does it comprise all proper treatments or methods of care. It is not a substitute for a treating clinician's independent professional judgment. Please check for updates at www.acog.org to ensure accuracy.

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This is EP054 in ACOG's Patient Education Pamphlet Series.

ISSN 1074-8601

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