



GENITAL HERPES

What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the herpes simplex viruses. Genital herpes is clearly defined by outbreaks during which blisters form on or around the genitals or rectum. The infection remains in the body indefinitely.

How do people get genital herpes?

There are two types of genital herpes: herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) and herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2). HSV-1 causes fever blisters on the mouth and lips or genital area. HSV-1 is spread by coming in contact with the saliva of an infected person, such as kissing or having oral sex with an infected person. HSV-2 is spread during sex with someone who has a genital HSV-2 infection. HSV-2 is released from sores as well as from skin that does not appear to be broken or have sores. This is called viral shedding.

What are the signs and symptoms of genital herpes?

HSV-2 usually produces only mild symptoms or signs, or no symptoms at all. Most people infected with HSV-2 are not aware of their infection because initial symptoms are flu-like, including fever and swollen glands. However, many adults seek medical help two to four weeks after HSV-2 is transmitted to them because they develop painful genital blisters on or around the genitals or rectum. When the blisters break, they leave tender ulcers (sores) that take two to four weeks to heal. Most people diagnosed with a first episode of genital herpes can expect to have several symptomatic recurrences (typically four or five) every year. These recurrences are usually less severe and shorter.

How is genital herpes diagnosed?

Health care providers diagnose genital herpes by visual inspection if the outbreak is typical, and by taking a sample from the sore(s). HSV infections can be difficult to diagnose between outbreaks. Blood tests which detect HSV-1 or HSV-2 infection may be helpful although the results are not always clear.

How is genital herpes treated?

There is no treatment that can cure herpes. However, antiviral medications can shorten and prevent outbreaks during the period when the individual takes the medication. Daily suppressive therapy for symptomatic herpes can also reduce transmission to partners.



What are the complications from genital herpes?

HSV-2 infection can be severe in people with suppressed immune systems. Regardless of the severity of symptoms, genital herpes frequently causes psychological distress in people who know they are infected.

Though rare, HSV-2 can cause potentially fatal infections in infants if the mother is shedding the virus at the time of delivery. It is important that women avoid contracting herpes during pregnancy because a first episode during pregnancy causes a greater risk of transmission to the newborn. If a woman has active genital herpes at delivery, a cesarean delivery is usually performed.

In the United States, HSV-2 may play a major role in the heterosexual spread of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Herpes can make people more likely to contract HIV infection, and it can make HIV-infected individuals more infectious.

How can people protect themselves against infection?

Consistently and correctly using latex or polyurethane condoms can help protect against infection. However, condoms do not provide complete protection because the condom may not cover the herpes sore(s), and viral shedding may nevertheless occur. If either partner has genital herpes, it is best to avoid sex when symptoms or signs are present, and to use latex condoms between outbreaks.

Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- 1-800-232-4636, TTY: 1-888-232-6348 in English and Spanish
- Genital herpes, <https://www.cdc.gov/std/herpes/default.htm>
- Genital herpes fact sheet, <https://www.cdc.gov/std/herpes/stdfact-herpes.htm>