

GENITAL HERPES

What is it?

Genital herpes is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections (STIs). It is caused by the Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV). There are two types of herpes simplex viruses - type 1 generally causes sores on or near the mouth (cold sores). Type 2 usually causes sores on or near the genitals or anus. These viruses are very alike and either type can cause sores on the mouth, genitals or anus. Although there is no cure for herpes, it is very manageable. Life continues beyond a positive herpes result.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of genital herpes are different from person to person. People with herpes don't know that they have it because symptoms can be very mild or no symptoms at all. Symptoms may include:

- fluid-filled blisters in the genital area (vaginal folds, vagina, cervix, head/shaft/foreskin of penis, scrotum, in or at the urethra, buttocks, anus or thighs)
- pain in the genital or anal area
- tingling
- pain with urination
- flu-like feelings (fever, aches in the joints or muscles)
- painful swelling in the lymph nodes of the groin
- genital itchiness with or without sores

Herpes symptoms usually show 2 to 20 days after contact with an infected person. Sometimes it may take weeks, months or years. The first outbreak of herpes can be the worst, causing many painful blisters. It can also cause only one mildly noticeable sore or none at all. Depending on the outbreak it can take up 3 weeks for symptoms to go away.

After symptoms are gone, the herpes virus remains in the body in nerve cells. Symptoms can come back anytime. Repeat type 2 outbreaks are common especially in the first year, on average 4-6 per year. However, they are usually shorter and less painful. The number of these outbreaks decreases the longer you have herpes. Genital type 1 outbreaks occur less frequently, maybe once a year or may be not all.

How is herpes spread from one person to another?

Herpes is spread from one person to another by:

- direct skin to skin contact

- vaginal sex (penis in vagina)
- anal sex (penis in rectum)
- oral sex (mouth to penis, vagina, anus)
- mouth to mouth
- sharing sex toys without cleaning between use or using without a new condom
- mother to child during pregnancy or a vaginal delivery

Herpes is most easily passed when sores are present or during the time just before an outbreak. This time before an outbreak is called the prodrome, when some people may have genital itching, irritation or tingling. Herpes can be passed to another person even when no symptoms are present. The virus can come to the skin surface without causing any symptoms. This is called asymptomatic shedding. Factors that may be related to an outbreak, can be:

- prolonged stress (emotional and physical)
- exposure to sunlight
- hormonal changes (e.g. menstruation)
- poor nutrition
- sex
- not enough sleep
- low immune system (e.g. following surgery, injury or when you have a fever or other illness)
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How to prevent spreading the virus?

- Do not have vaginal or anal sex, including oral sex on the genitals or anus, or skin to skin contact, when you have symptoms/sores or during the prodrome. Wait until the symptoms or sores are completely gone.
- Use condom/latex barriers all the time because:
 - in men, the penis is the main site of the virus
 - when sores are present you are more likely to get other STIs such as HIV if you come in contact with them
 - you may be shedding the virus even when you don't have sores
 - daily treatment can reduce asymptomatic shedding and transmission to partner(s).

Remember, condoms will not give total protection because the virus can be on other genital parts and surrounding skin

How is it diagnosed?

Genital herpes may be diagnosed by a doctor looking at the sores and with sexual history and/or previous symptoms. A swab of the fluid from a sore should be done to confirm the doctor's diagnosis. This swab can identify if it is HSV 1 or 2. This test is best done as soon as sores appear. If the sore/lesion is very small, or if it is healing, there may not be enough virus for an accurate test. If the doctor suspects herpes and your test result was negative, return for testing as soon as possible at the next sign of symptoms. Herpes is not usually screened during routine Pap and STI tests. Blood tests ordered by your doctor may detect the virus either type 1 or 2, but does not give its location on the body. You will have to pay for this test.

Is there treatment for herpes?

There is no cure for herpes. There are antiviral drugs that can help speed healing during an outbreak, lower the number of outbreaks and lower the chance of spreading the virus to others during and between outbreaks. These medications, such as acyclovir (Zovirax), valacyclovir (Valtrex) and famciclovir (Famvir), must be prescribed by a doctor. Medications can be expensive. If you do not have a drug plan see the "Patient Programs" listed below. You may also wish to consult a naturopath or homeopath.

Herpes and pregnancy?

Although rare, neonatal herpes (herpes infection in the newborn) can cause health problems for the newborn, usually during birth. Genital herpes can be more serious for the baby if the mother becomes infected for the first time during pregnancy, especially in her last trimester. A woman with a history of herpes will be given daily treatment in the last few weeks of her pregnancy to reduce viral shedding and lower the chance of having an outbreak at the time of delivery. If you:

- have herpes and are pregnant, talk to your health care provider. A caesarean section may be needed if there are symptoms present at delivery.
- are a male with a history of genital herpes and your partner is pregnant:
 - abstain from sex when you have an outbreak
 - use a condom/latex barrier for intercourse between outbreaks
 - possibly abstain from intercourse during the last 3 months of the pregnancy.
- have oral herpes, avoid oral sex when you have an outbreak

Herpes and Emotions

A herpes diagnosis can cause you to feel a wide variety of emotions: embarrassment, anger, shame, depression, especially in the first few months after getting your results. Whatever you feel know that, with time, these feelings will lessen and pass. Give yourself time to adjust and don't let herpes define who you are. Unfortunately there is still a lot of stigma that goes with this news.

Although it can be difficult, it is important to talk to your sexual partner (s) about having herpes. Reactions from others may vary, some positive some negative. Being well informed about herpes may help your confidence in telling others. You might find once you start telling others you hear they have it too or know someone who does. Remember herpes is more common than people think.

Resources

Here are some resources you may find helpful:

Phone Lines:

- Peel Public Health 905-799-7700
Ask for Sexual Health Information

Books and Web Sites:

- The Good News about the Bad News
By Terri Warren, New Harbinger Publications, Inc. 2009
- The Truth About Herpes, 4th Edition
by Stephen Sacks, Gordon Soules
Book Publishers Ltd.
- www.ashastd.org
"The Helper" newsletter
- www.westoverheights.com
Herpes Handbook & Counselling Video
- www.rxhelp.ca/valtrex
Patient Programs-print off card to access more affordable medication
- www.torontoherpes.com
SUPPORT Group –Phoenix Association
- Blood Work-Contact your local lab for herpes type 1 & 2 testing

**For more information call
Peel Public Health 905-799-7700
Ask for Sexual Health Information
or visit
peelsexualhealth.ca intheknowpeel.ca
peelregion.ca/health**