

GENITAL HERPES

What is it?

Genital herpes is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections (STIs), affecting about one in five adults. 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 the genitals. These viruses are very alike and either type can cause genital sores or cold sores. Once you have herpes, you become a carrier of the virus for life.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of genital herpes are different from person to person. It is estimated that 60% of people don't know that they have herpes because they have very mild or no symptoms. 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
- pain with urination
- flu-like feelings (fever, aches in the joints/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 is usually the worst. It can take 2 to 3 weeks for symptoms to go away. Genital herpes tends to be less severe when it is caused by HSV type 1.

After symptoms are gone, the herpes virus remains in the body in nerve cells near the spine. Symptoms can come back anytime. The number of outbreaks each person has is different but average 4 to 5 per year. Many people find that over time the number of outbreaks are less and not as painful.

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
- 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. It is not known exactly what causes an outbreak, but some reasons can be:

- 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)

You can help boost the immune system and lower the number of outbreaks by:

- not smoking
- eating a healthy diet
- getting enough rest
- exercising regularly
- trying a variety of ways to cope with stress

How to prevent spreading the virus?

- Do not have intercourse, including oral sex 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.

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 can be diagnosed by a doctor looking at the sores and with sexual history and/or previous symptoms. A swab of the fluid from a herpes sore can be taken to try to identify the virus. This test should be done within 48 hours after sores appear. If the sore/lesion is very small, or if it is healing, there may not be enough virus present for an accurate test. Herpes is not usually found during routine Pap and STI tests. Special blood tests ordered by your doctor may detect the virus but 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. These medications can be expensive. There are also alternative therapies available. You may wish to consult a naturopath or homeopath. Research is ongoing into new treatments and a possible vaccine.

Herpes and pregnancy?

Neonatal herpes (herpes infection in the newborn) is rare. An estimated 20-25% of pregnant women have genital herpes, while less than 0.1% of babies get infected during birth. Genital herpes can be more serious for the baby if the mother becomes infected for the first time during pregnancy. Herpes can cause health problems for a newborn. 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 - 20% of neonatal herpes is caused by herpes type 1.

Resources

It is normal to be emotionally stressed by a herpes diagnosis, especially in the first few months after getting your results. Give yourself time to adjust.

Here are some resources you may find helpful:

Phone Lines:

- Peel Public Health 905-799-7700
Ask for Sexual Health Information
or visit peelsexualhealth.ca, intheknowpeel.ca
or peelregion.ca/health
- Herpes HELPLine
The Phoenix Association
416-449-0876
- National U.S. Herpes Hotline
1-919-361-8488

Books and Web Sites:

- The Truth About Herpes, 4th Edition
by Stephen Sacks, Gordon Soules
Book Publishers Ltd.
- www.ashastd.org
“The Helper” newsletter
- www.cafeherpe.com
- www.herpesalliance.org
- www.herpesdiagnosis.com
- www.herpesweb.net
- www.torontoherpes.com

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