

## Herpes Simplex (Genital and oral)

### Description

Herpes is a common infection caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). Herpes usually causes painful blisters that break open and form sores. The most common sites of outbreaks are the genitals, mouth and rectal area. 16.2% of Americans 14-49 are currently infected with genital herpes, though most are asymptomatic (show no symptoms). More than 50% of American adults have oral herpes, which are commonly known as cold sores or fever blisters.

### What are the different types of Herpes Simplex?

The two most common types of herpes virus are herpes simplex virus type I (HSV-1) and herpes simplex virus type II (HSV-2).

#### HSV-1

- Most frequently causes infections of the mouth
- Less commonly causes infections of the genital or rectal areas

#### HSV-2

- Most frequently causes infections of the genitals and rectal area
- Less commonly causes infections of the mouth

**BOTH TYPES OF VIRUS ARE TRANSMITTED BY DIRECT CONTACT WITH INFECTED SKIN OR MUCOUS MEMBRANES.**

**HSV-1 INFECTIONS TEND TO CAUSE LESS FREQUENT AND SEVERE OUTBREAK RECURRENCES THAN HSV-2 INFECTIONS.**

### Transmission

Herpes is most contagious from the time just before blisters appear (prodromal stage) until the resulting sores are healed.

A person can become infected with the virus by contact with infected:

- Skin on the genitals
- Mouth
- Rectal area
- Buttocks

The infection is often passed from person to person during sexual intercourse. During oral sex, genital herpes can pass to the lips and mouth and, conversely, oral herpes on the lips can pass to the genitals.

Occasionally, herpes virus may be transmitted by infected individuals even though blisters and sores are not present and the skin appears normal (asymptomatic viral shedding). It is not known how often asymptomatic shedding occurs.

**ONCE A PERSON IS INFECTED, THE VIRUS STAYS IN THE BODY FOR LIFE.**

**THERE IS NO CURE FOR HERPES, ALTHOUGH SYMPTOMS CAN BE TREATED.**

Usually the virus is in an inactive state and stays within nerve cells near the spine without causing symptoms. However, at any time, the virus may become active and cause sores again. These outbreaks may occur as often as every few weeks or much less frequently and sometimes never. Most people infected with herpes have recurrent outbreaks that decrease in frequency over time as the body gradually builds immunity against the virus.

## Symptoms

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Symptoms usually occur about 2 to 12 days after the virus first enters the body and may include:

### **ORAL HERPES (FEVER BLISTERS, COLD SORES):**

- Blisters that occur on the lips and at the corner of the mouth.
- They usually break open and form painful open sores that crust over and scab.

*Note: Sores that are inside the mouth, on the tongue, or in the throat are usually canker sores, which are not caused by herpes and are not contagious. If you are unsure, consult your healthcare provider.*

### **GENITAL HERPES:**

Usually there is a group of several blisters, but there may be just a single blister.

Tiny clear blisters may occur:

- On the penis
- On the scrotum
- On the vulva (outer vaginal area)
- In the vagina
- On the cervix
- Near the rectum
- On the thighs or buttocks

The blisters quickly break open and form small (1/8 inch to 1/4 inch wide) pink or red shallow sores. The sores are tender to the touch and may crust over and scab. They usually heal without scarring. Other symptoms may include:

- Vaginal discharge
- Pain during urination
- Difficulty urinating
- Itching
- Tender, enlarged lymph nodes in the groin

The symptoms of herpes are usually most severe during the first outbreak. Flu-like symptoms are common and may include mild fever, headache, muscle aches, and general discomfort. In addition, sores are also usually more severe and last longer (10-12 days) than during recurrences (4-5 days).

*Note: Some people that become infected with HSV never have any symptoms or outbreaks. They are called asymptomatic carriers and usually do not even know they are infected.*

## Recurrences

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After the initial outbreak, the blisters may return periodically, usually in the same place; but sometimes in a different location. Certain conditions (trigger factors) can precipitate outbreaks. These may include:

- Emotional or physical stress
- Illness
- Tight clothing
- Menstruation,
- Intercourse without adequate lubrication

Some people may get "prodromal" or warning symptoms before an outbreak, often occurring from two hours to two days before the blisters starts to form. These may include the following at the site where the blisters will appear:

- Itching
- Tingling
- Burning
- Numbness

The infected person may be contagious at this time.

Most infected people average 3-4 outbreaks per year, although this number can vary. Some people never get a recurrence. Usually the frequency of outbreaks decreases over time as the person builds immunity against the virus.

## Diagnosis

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Your medical provider can usually diagnose herpes by sight when the **blisters or sores are present**. Often, a sample of cells or liquid from the lesions may be taken with a cotton swab and sent to the lab for microscopic examination or viral culture.

If **no blisters or sores are present**, special blood tests may be used to help diagnose a current or past infection.

## Treatment

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**HERPES CANNOT BE "CURED" AND THE VIRUS REMAINS IN THE BODY.**

Treatment is aimed at providing relief of symptoms and prevention of secondary infection from developing in the blisters. Your healthcare provider may prescribe acyclovir (Zovirax) or another antiviral drug to relieve the symptoms more quickly. These medicines will also shorten the amount of time that a person remains contagious. For people with very frequent recurrences, these medicines may be prescribed for use on a daily basis to decrease the frequency of recurrences.

Other recommendations during outbreaks:

- The infected area should be kept dry and clean to promote healing. Wear loose clothing, preferably cotton, to allow circulation of air.
- It also helps to avoid pressure on the skin, which may cause more blisters.
- Take aspirin, acetaminophen, or ibuprofen to reduce pain.
- Avoid sharing towels or clothing.
- Avoid using douches, perfumed soaps, sprays, feminine hygiene deodorants, or other chemicals in the genital area.
- Avoid a lot of sunlight and heat, which may cause more blisters.
- Avoid sexual contact with others.
- Wash hands frequently, especially after touching the infected area.
- If urination is painful, try urinating in the shower or bathtub. Water can help dilute the urine strength and discomfort it produces.

## Complications

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*If the virus comes in contact with the eye*, it can rarely cause **Herpes Keratitis**, a form of herpes that can result in blindness if left untreated. It is important to wash hands and avoid touching the eyes after contact with infected skin.

*Pregnant women with genital herpes* can transfer the virus to their babies if there are active sores present during vaginal birth. If this transmission does occur, serious health problems could result for the newborn. If herpes is present in or around the birth canal near the time of delivery, a cesarean section may be necessary. Thus, it is important to inform your doctor ahead of time so that steps can be taken to avoid infecting the baby at delivery.

## Prevention

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**Practice safe sex.**

- Use condoms every time you have intercourse, including during foreplay. It is not possible to predict when the virus can be shed or passed to another person.
- Ask your partner(s) if they have had herpes because herpes may be spread from areas not protected by condoms: for example, the groin, thigh, or scrotum.
- Avoid oral-genital sex and oral-anal sex with someone who has oral herpes (fever blisters, cold sores).

## For More Information:

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