

# GENITAL HERPES

## WHAT IS GENITAL HERPES?

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) affecting approximately one in seven people. The virus that causes this infection is called herpes simplex virus (HSV).

### SYMPTOMS

There are two types of herpes simplex viruses: Type 1 (HSV-1) and Type 2 (HSV-2). These viruses are very similar and either type can cause genital herpes or oral cold sores.

Once infected with HSV, the virus remains in your body even after symptoms are gone and can cause recurring infections. Between infections, the virus stays in your body but is less contagious than during an active symptomatic infection (outbreak).

Symptoms of primary infection usually appear about two to twenty-one days after sexual contact with an infected person and may include:

- Painful, fluid-filled blisters in the genital area (labia, vagina, cervix, head/shaft/foreskin of penis, scrotum, or in or around the urethral opening, buttocks, anus or thighs)
- Flu-like symptoms (fever, joint pain, muscle aches)
- Pain with urination
- Enlarged, tender lymph nodes in genital area
- Itching, tingling in the genital area
- Symptoms generally resolve after approximately 15 to 23 days

If recurrent infections (outbreaks) occur, symptoms are typically milder. It may take two to three weeks for symptoms to go away. For some people the symptoms are so mild they may not be aware of them. Genital herpes tends to be less severe when caused by HSV-1 rather than by HSV-2.

### SYMPTOMS OF RECURRENT INFECTION

- Slightly less severe than initial infection
- A slight tingling, itching, or burning may be a sign that an active infection (outbreak) is coming
- These can be triggered by stressors (such as illness, surgery, emotional stress), the menstrual cycle, sexual intercourse, surgery, and some medications
- Infection from oral sex can cause sores inside the mouth or on the lips of both men and women
- Symptoms of recurrent outbreaks generally resolve after approximately 9 to 11 days

### DIAGNOSIS

Herpes is usually diagnosed by a health care practitioner through examination and can be tested for by swabbing an active lesion. This test should be done within 48 hours after the start of symptoms when genital ulcers or lesions are present. If a sore is very small, or if it is healing, there may not be enough virus present for an accurate test.

## HOW IT SPREADS

HSV-1 is mainly transmitted via contact with the virus in sores, saliva, or surfaces in or around the mouth. Less commonly, HSV-1 can be transmitted to the genital area through oral-genital contact to cause genital herpes.

HSV-1 can be transmitted from oral or skin surfaces that appear normal; however, the greatest risk of transmission is when there are active sores. People who have HSV-1 are still at risk of acquiring HSV-2.

HSV-2 is mainly transmitted during sex through contact with genital or anal surfaces, skin, sores, or fluids of someone infected with the virus. HSV-2 can be transmitted even if the skin looks normal and can be transmitted in the absence of symptoms.

## PREVENTION

- People with symptoms of oral herpes should avoid oral contact with others (including oral sex) and sharing objects that touched saliva
- People with symptoms of genital herpes should abstain from sexual activity while experiencing symptoms
- Consistent and correct use of condoms is the best way to prevent genital herpes and other STI's; however, HSV infection can still occur through contact with genital or anal areas not covered by a condom

## TREATMENT

Antiviral medications help to reduce the severity and frequency of symptoms but cannot cure the infection .

## COMPLICATIONS

- Infected pregnant women can pass the virus to infants during birth, causing lesions and possibly life-threatening infections of the central nervous system of the baby
- Herpes infection in newborns is rare, a caesarean section may be needed if there are symptoms of herpes in the pregnant individual around the time of birth
- In very small number of cases HSV can cause meningitis or encephalitis (inflammation of the brain)
- Herpes infection of the eye can cause scarring of the cornea and even blindness
- Herpes increases the risk of transmission of HIV; people with HIV can have particularly severe outbreaks of HSV, which can be a sign their infection has progressed to AIDS

## THE FOLLOWING PRECAUTIONS SHOULD BE TAKEN DURING PREGNANCY

- If you are pregnant and have herpes, talk to your health care provider as they may recommend antiviral medication toward the end of your pregnancy
- If you have HSV and your partner is pregnant, abstain from sex when you have active outbreaks, use a condom between outbreaks and possibly abstain from intercourse during the last trimester
- If you have oral herpes, avoid oral sex during an outbreak (Twenty per cent of neonatal herpes is caused by HSV-1)

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [sexandu.ca](http://sexandu.ca)
- [Planned Parenthood Education Facts](#)
- York Region Public Health Sexual Health Clinics **1-800-361-5653, # 1**