

Genital Herpes

Genital herpes is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections in Australia. It is caused by the herpes simplex virus, the same virus that can cause cold sores on the face. Antiviral medicines may relieve symptoms, speed healing, limit further outbreaks of symptoms and protect against spread to others.

There are two types of the herpes simplex virus, called HSV-1 and HSV-2.

HSV-1 is a more common cause of cold sores and HSV-2 is a more common cause of genital herpes, but both types can cause both forms of infection.

Once a person has been infected with herpes simplex, it remains in their body for life. After the first episode of infection, the virus lies inactive in nerve cells and may reactivate from time to time.

Symptoms

Many people have no obvious symptoms and are not aware that they have genital herpes. Some people have one episode (outbreak) of symptoms after becoming infected, then no further

episodes. Others have repeated episodes of symptoms, which are caused by reactivation of herpes virus already present in the body.

When present, symptoms of genital herpes may include:

- Flu-like symptoms (e.g., feeling unwell, headaches, muscle aches, swollen glands)
- Skin redness or irritation around the genital area
- Itchiness, tingling or soreness around the genital area
- Painful lesions (similar to cold sores) on or near the genitals, anus, buttocks or thighs. The lesions start as small blisters which break open to form shallow, painful sores, then scab over and heal after one to two weeks.

Symptoms are usually the most severe during the first episode. Further outbreaks are often less painful and shorter lasting. Outbreaks may continue to occur for years, but may become milder and less frequent over time.

Possible triggers for repeated episodes include:

- Stress
- Hormone changes (e.g., menstruation)
- Poor diet
- Alcohol
- Illness
- Surgery
- Exposure to UV light (e.g., sun)
- Friction, such as that caused by sexual intercourse.

How is it spread?

Genital herpes spreads through skin-to-skin contact and can be spread by most forms of sexual contact. It is also possible for a person with a cold sore to transfer herpes to their partner's genitals and for a person with genital herpes to transfer the virus to their partner's face.

Contact with herpes lesions carries the greatest risk of infection and sexual contact should be avoided until all lesions have fully healed. Sometimes, however, the virus can also be passed on when no lesions are present.

A mother may pass the herpes virus to her baby during the baby's birth.

A woman who is pregnant or planning

to become pregnant should tell her doctor about her herpes, so the risks to the baby can be minimised.

Herpes simplex is a fragile virus that does not survive for long outside the human body. There have been no proven cases of genital herpes being spread through toilet seats, towels or other things used by an infected person.

Medicines

Genital herpes can be managed with antiviral medicines and pain relieving medicines.

Antiviral medicines (e.g., famciclovir, valaciclovir, aciclovir)

- A short course of antiviral medicine started as soon as possible (preferably less than 12 hours and no later than 72 hours) after an outbreak of symptoms can relieve symptoms and speed healing.
- A continuous daily dose of antiviral medicine can reduce the number and severity of outbreaks and reduce the chance of passing genital herpes to a sex partner.

Antiviral medicines must be prescribed by a doctor.

Self care

Ways to keep lesions clean and dry and to relieve discomfort include:

- Expose the lesions to warm, dry air for 10–15 minutes several times a day

- Bathe the lesions with salt water (saline) – use 2 teaspoons of salt per litre of water
- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine light coloured and dilute (unless a doctor advises not to)
- Urinate while genitals are in warm water, if urination is painful. A woman may stop urine touching the lesions by separating the lips of her vulva while sitting on the toilet
- Wear loose, cotton underpants and avoid tight trousers
- Avoid using soap, shower gel or bubble bath on the affected skin.

Ways to reduce the risk of catching or passing on herpes include:

- Limit your sexual activity to the one, same partner
- Use condoms (male or female), even when there are no lesions, as it is possible to pass on the infection even when no symptoms are present
- Avoid all sexual contact while you or your partner have an outbreak (any symptoms) of genital herpes or cold sores
- Never share sex toys without thoroughly cleaning them first
- Avoid touching lesions and wash your hands well after any contact.

Important

If you are worried that you may have genital herpes, it is best to consult a doctor when you have symptoms. A doctor can then arrange a special test for the herpes virus. Genital herpes blisters are cold sores in the genital area and need not be a cause of shame or guilt, or a serious barrier to relationships. Genital herpes counselling services are available. Ask a doctor or pharmacist.

Using condoms during oral, vaginal and anal sex protects only those areas in contact with the condom. People with herpes are encouraged to tell their sex partner, so that both of you can decide what precautions to take.

For more information

Australian Herpes Management Forum

Website: www.ahmf.com.au

New Zealand Dermatological Society Inc

Website: www.dermnetnz.org

Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia

Website: www.shfpa.org.au

Sexual health clinics

Listed under 'S' in the white pages of the phone book.

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when
choosing a medicine.*

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