



# Genital Herpes

<http://www.womenshealth.gov>

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

**Q: What is genital herpes?**

**A:** Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the herpes simplex viruses type 1 (HSV-1) or type 2 (HSV-2). Most genital herpes is caused by HSV-2. HSV-1 can cause genital herpes. But it more commonly causes infections of the mouth and lips, called “fever blisters.”

Most people have no or few symptoms from herpes infection. When symptoms do occur, they usually appear as 1 or more blisters on or around the genitals or rectum. The blisters break, leaving tender sores that may take up to 4 weeks to heal. Another outbreak can appear weeks or months later. But it almost always is less severe and shorter than the first outbreak.

Although the infection can stay in the body forever, the outbreaks tend to become less severe and occur less often over time. You can pass genital herpes to someone else even when you have no symptoms.

**Q: How common is genital herpes?**

**A:** Genital herpes is common. At least 45 million Americans age 12 and older have genital herpes. Genital HSV-2 infection is more common in women than men. About 1 in 4 women have HSV-2 infection compared to almost 1 in 8 men. This is due to the fact that women can get genital herpes and some other STIs more easily than men.

**Q: How is genital herpes spread?**

**A:** You can get genital herpes through genital-genital contact or genital-oral contact with someone who has herpes infection. The virus is most easily spread through contact with open sores. But you also can get the virus from skin that does not appear to have a sore. You can become infected with the herpes virus without having intercourse.

**Q: What are the symptoms of genital herpes?**

**A:** The symptoms of genital herpes vary from person to person. Most people with genital herpes are not aware they are infected. But, if symptoms do occur with the first outbreak, they can be severe. Genital herpes infection also can be severe and long-lasting in people whose immune systems don’t work properly, such as people with HIV.

The first outbreak usually happens within 2 weeks of having sexual contact with an infected person, and symptoms can last from 2 to 3 weeks. Early symptoms of the first outbreak can include:

- Itching or burning feeling in the genital or anal area
- Flu-like symptoms, including fever
- Swollen glands
- Pain in the legs, buttocks, or genital area
- Vaginal discharge
- A feeling of pressure in the area below the stomach

Within a few days, sores show up where the virus has entered the body, such as on the mouth, penis, or vagina. Sores can also show up on a woman’s cervix or in the urinary passage in men. The



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sores are small red bumps that may turn into blisters or painful open sores. Over a period of days, the sores become crusted and then heal without scarring. Sometimes with the first outbreak, a second crop of sores appear and flu-like symptoms occur again.

Some people have no symptoms. Or they might mistaken mild sores for insect bites or something else. Yet even without symptoms, a person can still pass the herpes virus to others. So, if you have signs of herpes, see your doctor to find out if you are infected.

If you have herpes, do not have any sexual activity with an uninfected partner when you have sores or other symptoms of herpes. Even if you don't have symptoms, you can still pass the virus to others.

**Q: Can genital herpes come back?**

**A:** Yes. Herpes symptoms can come and go, but the virus stays inside your body even after all signs of the infection have gone away. In most people, the virus becomes “active” from time to time, creating an outbreak. Some people have herpes virus outbreaks only once or twice. People who have a first outbreak can expect to have 4 or 5 outbreaks within a year. Over time, the outbreaks tend to occur less often and be less severe. Experts don't know what causes the virus to become active. Some women say the virus comes back when they are sick, under stress, out in the sun, or during their period.

**Q: How do I know for sure if I have genital herpes?**

**A:** Doctors can diagnose genital herpes by looking at visible sores if the outbreak is typical and by taking a sample from the sore for testing in a lab. Some cases of herpes are harder to diagnose, especially between outbreaks. Blood tests that look for antibodies to HSV-1 or HSV-2 can help to detect herpes infection in people without symptoms or between outbreaks.

**Q: What is the treatment for genital herpes?**

**A:** Genital herpes cannot be cured; the virus will always be in your body. But the antiviral drugs acyclovir, valacyclovir, and famciclovir can shorten outbreaks and make them less severe, or stop them from happening. Valacyclovir (brand name Valtrex) also can lower your risk of passing the infection to someone else.

Depending on your needs, your doctor can give you drugs to take right after getting outbreak symptoms or drugs to take on a regular basis to try to stop outbreaks from happening. Talk to your doctor about treatment options.

During outbreaks, these steps can speed healing and help keep the infection from spreading to other sites of the body or to other people:

- Keep the infected area clean and dry.
- Try not to touch the sores.
- Wash hands after contact.
- Avoid sexual contact from the time you first notice symptoms until the sores have healed.



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**Q: Is there a cure for genital herpes?**

**A:** No. Once you have the virus, it stays in your body and there is a chance that you will have outbreaks. Medicine can shorten and stop outbreaks from happening.

Research is underway to develop new ways to protect women from the herpes virus and prevent its spread. One large study is testing a herpes vaccine for women. Researchers are also working to make gels or creams that would kill the virus before it could infect someone.

**Q: Can genital herpes cause problems during pregnancy?**

**A:** Yes. If the mother is having her first outbreak near the time of delivery, she is much more likely to pass the virus to her baby. If the outbreak is not the first one, the baby's risk of getting the virus is very low. Babies born with herpes may be premature or may die, or they may have brain damage, severe rashes, or eye problems. Doctors may do a cesarean delivery if the mother has herpes sores near the birth canal to lower the risk of passing the virus. Fortunately, most women with genital herpes have healthy babies. Also, medicines can help babies born with herpes if they are treated right away.

It is not yet known if all genital herpes drugs are safe for pregnant women to take. Some doctors may recommend acyclovir be taken either as a pill or through an IV (a needle into a vein) during pregnancy. Let your doctor know if you have genital herpes, even if you are not having an outbreak. He or she will help you manage it safely during pregnancy.

**Q: Can I breastfeed if I have genital herpes?**

**A:** If you have genital herpes, you can keep breastfeeding as long as the sores are covered. Herpes is spread through contact with sores and can be dangerous to a newborn. If you have sores on your nipple or areola, the darker skin around the nipple, you should stop breastfeeding on that breast. Pump or hand express your milk from that breast until the sore clears. Pumping will help keep up your milk supply and prevent your breast from getting overly full. You can store your milk to give to your baby in a bottle at another feeding. If the parts of your breast pump that contact the milk also touch the sore(s) while pumping, you should throw the milk away.

**Q: Can genital herpes cause other problems?**

**A:** Genital herpes infection usually does not cause serious health problems in healthy adults. People whose immune systems don't work properly, such as people with HIV, can have severe outbreaks that are long-lasting. Sometimes, people with normal immune systems can get herpes infection in the eye. But this is less common with HSV-2 infection.

Herpes may play a role in the spread of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Herpes sores can make it easier for HIV to get into your body. Also, herpes can make people who are HIV-positive more infectious.

Living with herpes can be hard to cope with even if you have no symptoms. At first, you might feel embarrassed or ashamed. You might worry whether having herpes will affect your relationship with your sexual partner or keep you from having meaningful relation-



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ships in the future. Keep in mind that millions of people have herpes. And not unlike many other health issues, treatment can help you manage the infection. After a little time, most people with herpes are able to adjust to the diagnosis and move on. Let your doctor know if you're having a hard time adjusting. Talking to someone about your feelings may help.

**Q: What can I do to keep from getting genital herpes?**

- A:** There are things you can do to lower your risk of getting genital herpes:
- **Don't have sex.** The surest way to prevent any STI, including genital herpes, is to practice abstinence, or not having vaginal, oral, or anal sex. Keep in mind, you can get genital herpes from close contact other than sexual intercourse.
  - **Be faithful.** Having a sexual relationship with one partner who has been tested for herpes and is not infected is another way to lower your risk of getting infected. Be faithful to each other, meaning that you only have sex with each other and no one else.
  - **Use condoms.** Use condoms correctly and every time you have any type of sex. For vaginal sex, use a latex male condom or a female polyurethane condom. For anal sex, use a latex male condom. For oral sex, use a dental dam. Keep in mind that condoms may not cover all infected areas, so you can still get herpes even if you use a condom.
  - **Know that some methods of birth control, like birth control pills, shots, implants, or dia-**

**phragms, will not protect you from STIs.** If you use one of these methods, be sure to also use a latex condom or dental dam correctly and every time you have sex.

- **Talk with your sex partner(s) about STIs and using condoms.** It's up to you to make sure you are protected. Remember, it's your body! For more information, call the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at (800) 232-4636. If your partner is infected, take steps to lower your risk of getting herpes from your partner.
- **Talk frankly with your doctor and your sex partner(s) about any STIs you or your partner has or has had.** If you feel embarrassed, try to put this aside. Your doctor is there to help you with any and all health problems. Also, being open with your partners can help you protect your health and the health of others.
- **Know the symptoms.** Learn the common symptoms of genital herpes and other STIs. Do not have oral-genital contact if you or your partner has any signs of oral herpes, such as a fever blister. Seek medical help right away if you think you may have genital herpes or another STI. Don't have sexual contact until you have seen your doctor.

**Q: What should I do if I have genital herpes?**

- A:**
- See your doctor for testing and treatment right away.
  - Follow your doctor's orders and finish all the medicine that you are given. Even if the symptoms go



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away, you still need to finish all of the medicine.

- Avoid having any sexual activity while you are being treated for genital herpes and while you have any symptoms of an outbreak.
- Be sure to tell your sexual partners, so they can be tested.
- Remember that genital herpes is a life-long disease. Even though you may have long periods with no symptoms, you can still pass the virus to another person. Talk with your doctor about what you can do to have fewer future outbreaks, and how to prevent passing the virus to another person.

**Q: What should I do if my partner has genital herpes?**

- A:**
- Get tested to find out if you also are infected with the herpes virus.
  - Avoid having any sexual activity while your partner is being treated for a genital herpes outbreak or if your partner has symptoms of an outbreak, such as open sores.
  - Use condoms correctly and every time you have sex to lower your risk of becoming infected. Keep in mind that you can become infected with the herpes virus since condoms do not always cover all infected areas. Also, the virus can spread even if no symptoms are present.
  - Talk to your partner about using daily suppressive therapy to reduce the number of outbreaks and lower the risk of infecting you with the virus. ■

### *For more information*

For more information on genital herpes, call [womenshealth.gov](http://www.womenshealth.gov) at 1-800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

**Division of STD Prevention,  
NCHHSTP, CDC, HHS**

Internet address: <http://www.cdc.gov/std>

**National Institute of Allergy and  
Infectious Diseases, NIH, HHS**

Phone number: (866) 284-4107

Internet address: <http://www.niaid.nih.gov/publications/stds.htm>

**American Social Health Association**

Phone number: (800) 227-8922

Internet address: <http://www.ashastd.org/>

**Herpes Resource Center**

Phone: (919) 361-8400, (800) 230-6039

Internet Address: [http://www.ashastd.org/herpes/herpes\\_overview.cfm](http://www.ashastd.org/herpes/herpes_overview.cfm)

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