



All you need to know about genital herpes

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It is very common

'To be infected with a herpes simplex virus is a state of normality, not an abnormality,' states Professor George Kinghorn - sexual health specialist.

- Genital herpes is caused by either herpes simplex type 1 or herpes simplex type 2.
- In the UK, seven out of ten people have caught one of them by the age of 25.
- Only one person in three has symptoms, so most people do not know that they have caught anything.
- These are relatively harmless viruses which do not affect future health or fertility.

Herpes simplex belongs to a family of viruses which includes chickenpox and glandular fever: they all remain in the body and may cause further symptoms later. This is why they are sometimes called 'incurable'. In fact, if symptoms reappear, perhaps at times of illness or stress, they are cleared – or 'cured' – again by the immune system.

Herpes simplex infections do not usually spread through the body, and are normally limited to one area. This leaflet mainly deals with infections in the genital area.

The two types

Both types 1 and 2 can cause the skin conditions known as facial cold sores, genital herpes or whitlows (on fingers or hands). About half the cases of genital herpes are caused by type 1 and some facial cold sore infections are caused by type 2. The only practical difference is that type 1 may recur more often if it is a facial infection and type 2 is more likely to recur if caught on the genitals.

The symptoms of genital herpes

The time between infection and symptoms starting may be between 2 days and 2 weeks.

Most people have mild symptoms or even no symptoms when they are first infected so they will not realise that they have caught anything. This means that in some cases it can be many years before noticeable symptoms appear. The first sign of herpes simplex can appear during a faithful, long-term sexual relationship because it may have been caught before the relationship started. **Some people never have symptoms at all.**

At first, there may be tingling and/or itchy sensations in the genital area. The glands in the groin may become swollen and sensitive and there may be 'flu-like' symptoms. There may also be pains in the nerves near the affected place.

Small blisters or ulcers appear – there may be many, or just one. After 24 to 48 hours, these burst leaving small, red, sometimes painful sores which on 'dry' skin crust over. These heal in 3 to 10 days.

Is it genital herpes?

Anyone who thinks that they have been infected should go to a Sexual Health Clinic as soon as sores appear. The diagnosis is confirmed by testing a swab that has been rubbed on a sore, so you cannot be tested if there are no symptoms. Find your nearest clinic at <http://www.fpa.org.uk/find-a-clinic> Visits are confidential: clinics do not pass on personal information without patients' permission.

After diagnosis, the HVA (see website, helpline and email - above) can help with advice and support from people with personal experience of the condition.

Treating the first infection

A primary genital herpes infection will usually clear in two to three weeks. Antiviral tablets can shorten the duration and reduce the severity of the first episode. Aciclovir, in tablet form, is the most commonly used antiviral drug for this purpose.

Aciclovir creams are available but tests show that they have little effect. They may cause irritation if used on mucous membrane (inner 'wet' skin).

What can I do?

- Pain and inflammation can be reduced by taking painkillers such as ibuprofen, paracetamol or aspirin.
- A local anaesthetic e.g. Instillagel 2%, lidocaine 5% ointment or Xylocaine 10% spray can be applied. Dab (or spray) on as required to relieve pain. (These items are available from a pharmacy without prescription.)
- Keep the area clean: washing gently once a day is sufficient. Some people find that a warm salt water solution (1 teaspoon to 1 pint water) is soothing. Avoid scented soaps/gels/deodorants.
- Wash hands before touching blisters/sores to avoid infecting broken skin with bacteria. Wash afterwards in accordance with normal hygiene.
- Keep the area cool: apply a **well-wrapped** ice pack for up to 90 minutes. **DO NOT** put ice directly on skin.
- Women who find urinating painful can try doing it in the bath or shower, or sitting on the edge of the bath and pouring water over the area. This will dilute the urine and ease stinging. An anaesthetic (see above) can be applied before urinating. It takes a few minutes for the area to become numb.

Leave the area alone as much as possible - let the skin heal. Symptoms will heal with or without treatment.

Recurrences

Around half of those diagnosed only have symptoms once or twice. Others have occasional recurrences

These usually get milder and less frequent with time and may stop altogether. A person with frequent outbreaks may be able to work out what causes them so as to prevent them. Common causes are tiredness, illness, stress, menstruation and too much alcohol.

Most people find that their body controls the infection without medicine, or that changes to lifestyle will improve the immune response.

For those who find recurrences frequent or unacceptable, treat the first warning symptoms immediately. The usual treatment is an antiviral tablet called aciclovir. Specialist doctors' advise 800 mg aciclovir three times a day, for one to three days. This should prevent an outbreak from developing. Treatment is much less useful once a sore has appeared. Some people prefer to take daily antiviral tablets to prevent outbreaks and these can be taken for six months or more; free from clinics. The HVA can advise on alternative therapies.

How is it caught and passed on?

It is caught by skin contact with the affected area: rubbing directly against the patch of skin when virus is present.

Transmission is very likely if there are lumps, blisters or sores, not very likely when there are no symptoms. It is caught on the genitals by having sex with someone when the virus is active on their genitals or by receiving oral sex from someone with a facial cold sore. It is not caught off towels, sheets, cups, cutlery or other objects; nor from baths, swimming pools or blood.

It is easier for the thin skin of the lips, genital and anal region to become infected. 'Normal' or 'dry' skin is too thick to allow easy entry. However, when normal skin is damaged, perhaps by eczema or sunburn, the virus may get in. Some people catch finger infections ('herpetic whitlows') if they have broken skin on the fingers.

Do not allow a sexual partner to come into contact with the affected area when there are symptoms or warning signs in that area such as itching, stabbing pains, tingling, burning or aching. Transmission risk is low outside of these times. Condoms can help to prevent transmission if they are put on **before** there is any skin contact with the affected skin area and as long as they cover the right area. Condoms should always be used with a new partner.

Can the virus be passed on when there are no symptoms? What is 'asymptomatic shedding' or 'viral shedding'?

Virus can be present on the skin when there are no visible symptoms. This is called 'viral shedding' or 'asymptomatic shedding'. If enough virus is present when direct skin contact occurs, a partner may become infected. Very low levels may not be enough to infect a partner. Many people will be aware of an itch or tingle in the affected area at these times – and so can avoid sexual contact.

Shedding decreases with time and after two years, people with few recurrences hardly shed any virus.

- In people with genital infection, asymptomatic shedding occurs on average for 2 per cent of the time for people with type 2 infection and 0.7 per cent of the time for those with type 1.
- If there are very few recurrences, there will be minimal asymptomatic shedding.
- People with frequent recurrences may be infectious about a week before and after.

Genital herpes is often caught from someone who is unaware of having it, since a high proportion of people don't realize that their minor symptoms such as spots, sores, pimples or patches of red skin are herpes simplex. These visible symptoms are much more infectious than invisible 'shedding'.

Can it be caught again? Can a partner be reinfected?

Most people only catch one herpes simplex virus type once. If two people in a relationship have different types, they might catch the other type, but symptoms are likely to be mild. If they have the same type there is a small chance that they might pass the virus to an area of the partner that has not been infected, but if this happens the symptoms are often so mild they are not noticed.

Herpes myths: pregnancy and the internet

Herpes, like all sexual infections, has been stigmatised and there a number of myths about it.

Recurrences of genital herpes do not affect the baby while it is in the womb. It is rare for herpes simplex to affect a baby during birth and the possibility of this happening is often exaggerated. "Management of genital herpes in pregnancy" from RCOG/BASHH* states that women with genital herpes should expect a normal delivery even if they have an outbreak at term. Only women who have their first episode after the 28th week will be advised to have a section. The Herpes Viruses Association has detailed leaflets including "pregnancy and childbirth" and "transmission", that can be requested when you subscribe: www.herpes.org.uk/shop.

Information on websites, or in books and leaflets can sometimes be unreliable, incorrect or exaggerated, causing unnecessary anxiety. If you have any worries, contact the Herpes Viruses Association for clarification.

And in the end:

Herpes simplex has an unnecessary stigma. It is caught by most people and many do not notice.

The Herpes Viruses Association says "If you see an article or website about genital herpes that is scary, contact us for the facts."

PLEASE NOTE: People who have defective or suppressed immune systems may have extra problems with many infections including herpes simplex: doctors can take extra steps to help them.

*Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology / British Association for Sexual health and HIV.