



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,' - Professor George Kinghorn - sexual health specialist.

- Genital herpes is caused by herpes simplex type 1 (HSV-1) or herpes simplex type 2 (HSV-2).
- In the UK, seven out of ten people have caught at least one type by the age of 25.
- Only one person in three will have symptoms, so most people do not know that they have caught anything.
- These viruses are relatively harmless and 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 do reappear, they are healed – or 'cured' - by the immune system.

Herpes simplex infections are normally limited to one area (or dermatome) and do not usually spread to another place on the body. The information here is mainly about infections in the genital area.

The two types

HSV-1 and HSV-2 may cause facial cold sores, genital herpes or whitlows (on fingers or hands), depending on where they are caught. About half the cases of genital herpes are caused by HSV-1. Most facial cold sore infections are caused by HSV-1 but some are caused by HSV-2. The only practical difference is that HSV-1 may recur more frequently if caught facially and HSV-2 is more likely to recur if caught on the genitals.

The symptoms of genital herpes

The interval between infection and appearance of symptoms may be between 2 days and 2 weeks.

Most people have mild symptoms or even none at all when they are first infected so they do not realise that they have caught anything. It can be many years before symptoms appear, which sometimes happens during a faithful, long-term sexual relationship. This can cause suspicion although it may have been caught before the relationship started.

Some people never have symptoms at all.

For those who do - 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 genital herpes symptoms should get a swab done at a Sexual Health Clinic for a diagnosis. You cannot be tested if there are no symptoms. Find your nearest clinic at <https://sxt.org.uk/> Visits are confidential: clinics do not pass on information without patients' permission.

Treating the first/primary 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 (numbing cream) 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 of 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: a **well-wrapped** ice pack applied for up to 90 minutes can be soothing. 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 while pouring water over the area. This dilutes the urine and eases stinging. An anaesthetic (see above) can be applied a few minutes beforehand to numb the area.

Leave the sore skin alone as much as possible – allow it to heal naturally. Symptoms will heal with or without treatment.

Recurrences

Many of those diagnosed only have symptoms once or twice. Others have occasional episodes. These usually get milder and less frequent with time and may stop altogether. Common triggers 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.

If you find outbreaks are frequent or unacceptable, start treatment as soon as the first warning symptoms are noticed. The usual treatment is an antiviral tablet called aciclovir. Take 800 mg aciclovir three times a day, for up to three days. This should prevent the outbreak from developing. Treatment is much less useful once a sore has appeared.

Some people prefer to take antiviral tablets daily to prevent outbreaks completely and these can be continued as long as required; aciclovir is free from sexual health clinics. See <https://herpes.org.uk/> for alternative therapies.

Do I need to talk about it with partners?

It is OK if you don't want to talk about this common skin condition. There is no legal requirement. But if you are getting outbreaks from time to time, it is easier to say 'not tonight' if you have explained. Our 'Talking to a new partner' leaflet for members goes into this in detail: www.herpes.org.uk/join.

How is it caught and passed on?

It is caught by skin contact: rubbing directly against the affected 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 from 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 through what is called 'viral shedding' or 'asymptomatic shedding'. If enough virus is present when direct skin contact occurs, a partner may become infected. Low levels of virus may not be enough to infect a partner.

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 for about a week before and after.

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

Can herpes be caught again? Can a partner be re-infected?

Most people only catch one type of herpes simplex virus once. If two people have different types, either of them might catch the other type, but symptoms are likely to be mild. When they have the same type we do not expect them to catch it again on any part of the body, and if this does happen the symptoms will be so mild they will not be aware.

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 a baby while it is in the womb. It is also rare for a baby to be affected during birth. This possibility 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 ever episode after the 28th week will be advised to have a C-section. The Herpes Viruses Association has detailed leaflets including "Pregnancy and childbirth" and "Transmission", that can be requested by members: www.herpes.org.uk/shop.

Blood tests off the internet do not give reliable results: three in ten negative results are wrong.

Information on websites, in books or in leaflets can sometimes be unreliable, incorrect or exaggerated, causing unnecessary anxiety. If you have any concerns, 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."

The HVA (see website, helpline and email - above) can help with advice and support. Our helpliners and staff all have personal experience of the condition.

PLEASE NOTE: People with 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.