

# Genital Herpes

Genital herpes is an infection with herpes simplex virus (HSV) causing blisters and sores on the genitals and surrounding areas. HSV is the same virus that causes cold sores. There are two types of HSV: type 1 (HSV 1) and type 2 (HSV 2). Genital herpes can be caused by both type 1 and type 2 HSV.

## *What are the symptoms of genital herpes?*

Some people with genital herpes do not have any symptoms and do not know they have the virus. Others will have symptoms as early as 4-7 days after exposure. However, for some people symptoms may not occur for months or even years after exposure to the virus. Symptoms are often more severe with the first outbreak of HSV.

### **First outbreak or episode of HSV**

Symptoms can include:

- painful blisters or sores in the genital and anal areas
- an increase in vaginal discharge
- pain passing urine
- headache and fever
- generalised aches and pains.

### **Recurrent outbreaks**

After the initial infection, HSV remains in the nervous system and can reactivate, causing outbreaks when the virus travels along the nerves to the genital skin. This is more likely to occur with HSV 2.

Symptoms of an HSV recurrence can include:

- a tingling or itching sensation down your leg or in the genital or anal region
- uncomfortable or painful blisters or sores
- an increase in vaginal discharge
- pain when passing urine.

Recurrent outbreaks are usually less severe as the body's immune system produces protective antibodies in response to the initial infection. Triggers for recurrence can include illness, stress, sunlight, fatigue, skin damage and alcohol. Over time, recurrences become less frequent and less severe.

## *How do I know when I became infected with genital herpes?*

As there can be a delay between being exposed to HSV and the first symptom outbreak, it is often not possible to know when someone first became infected.

## *How is genital herpes diagnosed?*

Genital herpes can be diagnosed when the infection is active, so it is important to seek medical attention as soon as symptoms develop. To diagnose HSV, a swab is used to collect a sample of fluid from a blister or lesion. The sample is then sent to a laboratory for testing.

## *How do you get genital herpes and how common is it?*

HSV is transmitted by skin-to-skin contact with someone who has the infection. This usually occurs during vaginal, anal or oral sex. If you have sex with someone who has herpes symptoms (including cold sores) then you can easily become infected. HSV gains entry to the body through the moist thin skin of the genital tract, mouth and anus, or through tiny skin abrasions. HSV then enters nerve tissue where it remains. Over 70% of Australians carry type 1 HSV and approximately 13% carry type 2 HSV.

## *Is there treatment for genital herpes?*

Yes. There are several different antiviral medications that can be used to manage HSV. Antivirals work by preventing HSV from multiplying and are used as follows:

### **Initial episode/first outbreak treatment**

Antiviral medication taken for 5 days to reduce the severity of symptoms

### **Episodic therapy for recurrences**

Antiviral medication taken when outbreaks occur to lessen their severity and duration. Most effective taken as soon as symptoms start (itch, tingling) or within the first 24 hours.

### **Suppressive therapy to prevent recurrences**

If recurrences occur frequently, antiviral medication taken daily to prevent outbreaks.

## *What can happen if genital herpes is not treated?*

It is OK not to treat herpes if the symptoms do not worry you.

## *How can I protect my sexual partner from getting genital herpes?*

Avoid having vaginal, anal and oral sex when you have any symptoms of HSV. Condoms have been shown to reduce the transmission of HSV from the penis, and they also provide protection from other sexually transmissible infections. HSV can be transmitted if it is present in other genital areas. As HSV survives in the nerves of the skin, the virus may still be present even if a person has no symptoms. This means there is still a chance that it can be passed to someone. Try and talk to your partner about HSV. Your clinician can discuss ways to do this.

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### **References:**

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