



Genital Herpes

Genital herpes is an infection with herpes simplex virus (HSV). It causes blisters and sores on your 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.

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

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

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 being exposed to the virus. For some people symptoms may not occur for months or even years after being exposed to the virus. Symptoms are often worse with the first outbreak of genital herpes.

Symptoms of first outbreak or episode of genital herpes:

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

After the initial infection, the virus stays in your nervous system and can reactivate. This causes outbreaks when the virus travels along your nerves to your genital skin. This is more likely to happen if you have HSV 2.

Symptoms of genital herpes recurrence can include:

- a tingling or itching sensation down your leg or in your 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 your immune system produces protective antibodies when it reacts to your first infection. Things that can cause a recurrence 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 the virus and having your first symptoms, it is often not possible to know when someone first became infected.



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How is genital herpes diagnosed?

Genital herpes can only be diagnosed when the infection is active. It is important to see your health professional as soon as you start to get symptoms. 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.

Is there treatment for genital herpes?

Yes. There are several different antiviral medicines that can be used to manage genital herpes. Antivirals work by stopping the virus from multiplying.

Treatment for first outbreak

Antiviral medicine for 5 days to reduce the severity of symptoms.

Treatment taken when you have more outbreaks (recurrences)

Antiviral medicine taken to reduce the severity and length of symptoms. This treatment is most effective if taken within the first 24 hours of symptoms starting.

Treatment to stop you having more outbreaks

If you have outbreaks frequently, you may be given antiviral medicine to take daily.

What can happen if genital herpes is not treated?

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

How can I protect my sexual partner(s) from getting genital herpes?

Avoid having vaginal, anal and oral sex when you have any symptoms of genital herpes. Condoms have been shown to reduce the transmission of genital herpes from the penis, and they also provide protection from other sexually transmissible infections.

The virus can be transmitted if it is present in other genital areas. As it 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. If you need more information or have any questions, please contact the Canberra Sexual Health Clinic on (02) 5124 2184.

References: Albrecht, M. (2019) *Patient Information: Genital Herpes (Beyond the Basics)* Accessed www.uptodate.com/contents/genital-herpes-beyond-the-basics

NHS Choices (2020) *Genital Herpes*. Accessed <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/genital-herpes/>

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