

# Genital Herpes – CDC Fact Sheet



Herpes is a common sexually transmitted disease (STD) that any sexually active person can get. Most people with the virus don't have symptoms. It is important to know that even without signs of the disease, it can still spread to sexual partners.

## What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is an STD caused by two types of viruses. The viruses are called herpes simplex type 1 (HSV-1) and herpes simplex type 2 (HSV-2).

## How common is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is common in the United States. In the United States, likely more than one out of every six people aged 14 to 49 years have genital herpes.

## How is genital herpes spread?

You can get herpes by having vaginal, anal, or oral sex with someone who has the disease.

You can also get herpes if you come into contact with the herpes virus in the saliva, genital secretions, or skin (in the oral or genital area, depending on the site of infection) of a person with herpes infection. You can get herpes from an infected sex partner who does not have a visible sore or who may not know he or she is infected. It is also possible to get genital herpes if you receive oral sex from a sex partner who has oral herpes.

## How can I reduce my risk of getting herpes?

The only way to avoid STDs is to not have vaginal, anal, or oral sex.

- Not having sex;
- Being in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who is not infected with an STD (e.g., a partner who has been tested and has negative STD test results);
- Using latex condoms the right way every time you have sex.

Herpes infection can occur in the genital areas of men and women that are covered by a latex condom. However, herpes virus can also be released (shed) from areas that are not covered by a condom so condoms may not fully protect you from getting herpes.

National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention  
Division of STD Prevention



If you are in a relationship with a person known to have genital herpes, your risk of getting genital herpes can be reduced if your partner takes an anti-herpes medication every day. This is something your partner should discuss with his or her doctor. You should also avoid sexual activity when your partner has herpes symptoms (i.e., when your partner is having an outbreak).

### **I'm pregnant. How could genital herpes affect my baby?**

If you are pregnant and have genital herpes, it is very important for you to go to prenatal care visits. You need to tell your doctor if you have ever had symptoms of, or have been diagnosed with genital herpes. You should also tell your doctor if you have ever been exposed to genital herpes. There is some research that suggests that genital herpes infection may lead to miscarriage, or could make it more likely for you to deliver your baby too early. Herpes infection can be passed from you to your unborn child and cause a potentially deadly infection (called neonatal herpes). It is important that you avoid getting herpes during pregnancy. If you are pregnant and have genital herpes, you may be offered herpes medicine towards the end of your pregnancy. This medicine may reduce your risk of having signs or symptoms of herpes at the time of delivery. At the time of delivery, your doctor should carefully examine you for herpes sores. If you have herpes symptoms at delivery, a 'C-section' is usually performed.

### **How do I know if I have genital herpes?**

Most people who have herpes have no, or very mild symptoms. You may not notice mild symptoms or you may mistake them for another skin condition, such as a pimple or ingrown hair. Because of this, most people who have herpes do not know it.

Herpes sores usually appear as one or more blisters on or around the genitals, rectum or mouth. The blisters break and leave painful sores that may take weeks to heal. These symptoms are sometimes called "having an outbreak." The first time someone has an outbreak they may also have flu-like symptoms such as fever, body aches, or swollen glands.

Repeat outbreaks of genital herpes are common, especially during the first year after infection. Repeat outbreaks are usually shorter and less severe than the first outbreak. Although the infection stays in the body for the rest of your life, the number of outbreaks tends to decrease over a period of years.

You should be examined by your doctor if you notice any of these symptoms or if your partner has an STD or symptoms of an STD, such as an unusual sore, a smelly discharge, burning when urinating, or, for women specifically, bleeding between periods.

### **How will my doctor know if I have herpes?**

Often times, your healthcare provider can diagnose genital herpes by simply looking at your symptoms. Providers can also take a sample from the sore(s) and test it. In certain situations, a blood test may be used to look for herpes antibodies. Have an honest and open talk with your health care provider and ask whether you should be tested for herpes or other STDs.

Please note that while a herpes blood test can help determine if you have herpes infection, it will not be able to tell you who gave you the infection.

### **Can herpes be cured?**

There is no cure for herpes. However, there are medicines that can prevent or shorten outbreaks. One of these herpes medicines can be taken daily, and makes it less likely that you will pass the infection on to your sex partner(s).

## What happens if I don't get treated?

Genital herpes can cause painful genital sores and can be severe in people with suppressed immune systems. If you touch your sores or the fluids from the sores, you may transfer herpes to another part of your body, such as your eyes. Do not touch the sores or fluids to avoid spreading herpes to another part of your body. If you touch the sores or fluids, immediately wash your hands thoroughly to help avoid spreading your infection.

Some people who get genital herpes have concerns about how it will impact their overall health, sex life, and relationships. It is best for you to talk to a health care provider about those concerns, but it also is important to recognize that while herpes is not curable, it can be managed. Since a genital herpes diagnosis may affect how you will feel about current or future sexual relationships, it is important to understand how to talk to sexual partners about STDs.

If you are pregnant, there can be problems for you and your developing fetus, or newborn baby. See "I'm pregnant. How could genital herpes affect my baby?" above for information about this.

## Can I still have sex if I have herpes?

If you have herpes, you should tell your sex partner(s) and let him or her know that you do and the risk involved. Using condoms may help lower this risk but it will not get rid of the risk completely. Having sores or other symptoms of herpes can increase your risk of spreading the disease. Even if you do not have any symptoms, you can still infect your sex partners.

## What is the link between genital herpes and HIV?

Herpes infection can cause sores or breaks in the skin or lining of the mouth, vagina, and rectum, providing a way for HIV to enter the body. When the sores come into contact with your sex partner's mouth, vagina, or rectum, they increase the risk of giving or getting HIV if you or your partner has HIV. Also, even without visible sores, having genital herpes increases the number of CD4 cells (the cells that HIV targets for entry into the body) found in the lining of the genitals.

## What is the link between genital herpes and oral herpes (cold sores on the mouth)?

Oral herpes (such as cold sores or fever blisters on or around the mouth) is usually caused by HSV-1. Most people are infected with HSV-1 during childhood from non-sexual contact. For example, people can get infected from a kiss from a relative or friend with oral herpes. More than half of the population in the U.S. has HSV-1, even if they don't show any signs or symptoms. HSV-1 can also be spread from the mouth to the genitals through oral sex. This is why some cases of genital herpes are caused by HSV-1.



Division of STD Prevention  
(DSTDP)

<https://www.cdc.gov/STD/>

Centers for Disease Control and  
Prevention

Personal health inquiries and  
information about STDs:

CDC-INFO Contact Center

1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636)

TTY: (888) 232-6348

Contact CDC-INFO

<https://wwwn.cdc.gov/dcs/>

### Resources:

CDC National Prevention  
Information Network (NPIN)

<https://npin.cdc.gov/disease/stds>

P.O. Box 6003

Rockville, MD 20849-6003

E-mail: [npin-info@cdc.gov](mailto:npin-info@cdc.gov)

American Sexual Health  
Association (ASHA)

[http://www.ashasexualhealth.org/  
stdsstis/](http://www.ashasexualhealth.org/stdsstis/)

P.O. Box 13827

Research Triangle Park,  
NC 27709-3827

1-800-783-9877