

Genital Herpes

What is it?

Genital herpes virus infection is common and affects about 12% of the Australian population who have had sex. However, most of those infected are unaware of their status, as they do not have symptoms. There are two types of Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV), 1 and 2. They can infect the genitals and the area around the mouth. A herpes infection of the mouth is nearly always caused by type 1 and is usually referred to as cold sores. Either herpes type 1 or 2 causes an infection of the genitals. An infected person carries the virus for life.

How can it be recognized?

The first time a person is infected with the virus they may experience no symptoms, or minor to quite severe symptoms, which usually develop days, weeks, or longer, after infection occurs. Symptoms may begin with a tingling or prickling of the skin, followed by reddening and small blisters, which break leaving painful ulcers. The groin glands may become enlarged and the person may feel generally unwell. There may be difficulty in passing urine. Future episodes are usually much less severe and may cause minor sores or reddening that can be difficult to recognize as herpes. Some people will have no further outbreaks of herpes symptoms but a small number will have frequent episodes. Those who catch the virus without first experiencing any symptoms may develop them at a later stage.

How is the virus passed on?

The virus is passed on to a partner by the close skin contact involved in sex, including oral sex. Herpes is most likely to be passed on when an infected person has sores. However, the virus can also be passed on at other times. Most people infected with herpes catch it from someone they have sex with, who is unaware they are infected or don't have symptoms at the time.

For those in long-term relationships, herpes is passed from the infected partner to the uninfected at a rate of about 10% per year. It is possible to be with someone for 10 years or more and not become infected. The reason for this is unknown.

What causes an episode of herpes?

In most cases of recurring symptoms, no cause can be found, although for some, emotional stress, physical illness, skin irritation and menstruation may be triggers. Symptoms may occur at intervals of a few days to many years. Episodes usually become less frequent with time.

How is genital herpes diagnosed?

A swab can be taken from a sore when a doctor suspects a diagnosis of genital herpes. This may hurt a little. A positive swab is correct in 99% of cases but a negative swab, although reassuring, doesn't always rule out herpes.

Blood tests only have a small role to play in herpes diagnosis. They are not routinely used to screen for herpes and they are prone to error. It is important to discuss the pros and cons of a blood test in some detail with your doctor or nurse before going ahead.

How is an episode of genital herpes treated?

Prescribed tablets can be used effectively to treat symptoms. If you think you have herpes for the first time it is especially important see a doctor. Although medication can't rid the body of the virus, starting it promptly can dramatically minimize symptoms.

Medications can be taken in two ways:

- Episodic treatment: tablets are taken for several days while experiencing symptoms.
- Suppressive treatment: tablet/s are taken every day to prevent or decrease the number of episodes.

These are very successful at controlling symptoms but don't guarantee that the virus won't be passed on to others. It is important to use barrier protection eg condoms, female condoms and dams, as this is thought to decrease the risk of passing on the infection. A dam is a thin latex sheet placed over (any part of) the body for safer oral sex.

The application of a local anaesthetic cream and baths or application of sponges soaked in weak salt water (one teaspoon of salt to half a litre of water) may also help.

Pregnancy and genital herpes

If a pregnant woman or her partner knows they have herpes, it is advisable to let her doctor/obstetrician know.

A woman who knows she has herpes and falls pregnant, has only a minute chance of passing the infection on to her baby. This is because she will have developed antibodies that she will pass on to the baby to protect it. If she has an episode of herpes at the time of delivery, the doctor will discuss with her any treatment or procedures that need to be undertaken.

An uninfected woman whose partner has genital herpes should seek medical advice when planning to have a baby.

The worst time for a women (who doesn't have herpes) to contract it would be during a pregnancy. This is because the mother has not developed protective antibodies, which would otherwise have been passed on to the baby.



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