

Genital Herpes

What is genital herpes?

Herpes is an infection caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). It is very common and does affect both men and women. Following an infection by the virus, some people experience a genital herpes outbreak before it becomes dormant and remains in the body. For some people the virus can become active again from time to time.

What are the symptoms?

- The first thing you may notice is some tingling in the genital area.
- Then you could develop small painful blisters.
- These blisters will break and form ulcers; these will slowly dry up and heal over 5-10 days.
- The first time you get the sores, they may last for a few weeks and some people may also feel quite sick with headaches, backache and swollen glands in the groin.

What other problems can it cause?

Genital herpes can come back again and again. It affects everyone differently. In some people it may come back quite often while in others, it may never come back (or only very seldom). The sores can be very uncomfortable in some people and mild or even not noticed by others. Many people can tell when the sores are going to appear as they get some itching or tingling in the area beforehand.

Women who have had genital herpes and who are pregnant should tell their doctor. If herpes sores are present around the time of delivery, a caesarean section may be offered to try to prevent the baby being infected. Neonatal herpes (herpes affecting the baby) is a very rare, but very serious condition.

Having herpes sores can make it easier for a person to become infected with HIV or to pass HIV on to someone else.

How do you get genital herpes?

The virus is transmitted through skin to skin contact – such as during any type of sex, or close genital contact. Contact does not have to be directly with herpes sores; the virus can still be present in normal looking skin and passed on. People can be infected with herpes, and not know it. They may not recognise any symptoms, but are still able to pass it on to their sexual partners. Using a condom is an important way of preventing infection, however because infected skin may not always be covered by the condom, it does not give 100% protection.

What tests do you do?

A swab can be taken from a sore to look for the virus. Tests (generally a urine sample, or possibly a blood test) should also be done to look for other possible STDs and HIV.

What is the treatment?

Unfortunately, there is no cure for herpes; treatment is aimed at relieving symptoms and improving quality of life.

There are antiviral tablets that will reduce the discomfort and make the sores heal more quickly, if taken early enough after the sores appear. Pain relief and ice packs can help soothe the area. People troubled by frequent episodes can take medication every day to try to prevent the sores coming back.

