

Herpes

What is herpes?

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted disease caused by the herpes simplex viruses type 1 (HSV-1) or type 2 (HSV-2). Most (but not all) cases of oral herpes is caused by HSV-1, while most (but not all) cases of genital herpes is caused by HSV-2.

How common is herpes?

Nationwide, one out of five adolescents and adults, have had genital HSV infection. HSV-2 is more common in women (approximately one out of four) than in men (almost one out of eight). This may be due to male-to-female transmission being more likely than female-to-male transmission.

What are the symptoms of herpes?

Most people have no or only minimal signs or symptoms from HSV infection. However, typical symptoms include one or more blisters on or around the genitals, rectum, or in and around the mouth and nose. The blisters break, leaving tender ulcers (sores) that may take two to four weeks to heal the first time they occur. The first outbreak is typically the longest and most severe and may or may not be accompanied by flu-like symptoms (fever, chills, body aches). The HSV infection stays in the body forever; however, the number of outbreaks tends to decrease over time.

How did I get herpes?

HSV-1 and HSV-2 is found and released from the sores that the virus cause, but the virus is also shed from skin between outbreaks even if a sore is not present. HSV is spread during sexual contact, including intercourse, genital contact, oral sex, and/or kissing. Transmission can occur from an infected partner without a visible sore; he or she may not know they are infected.

How is herpes diagnosed?

Health care providers can diagnose herpes by visual inspection and by taking a sample from the sore(s) and testing it in the laboratory. HSV infections can also be diagnosed between outbreaks using a blood test that detects antibodies to HSV-1 or HSV-2.

How is herpes treated?

There is no treatment for herpes, but antiviral medications can shorten and prevent outbreaks during the period of time the person takes the medication. In addition, daily suppressive therapy for symptomatic herpes can reduce transmission to partners. Suppressing therapy near the end of pregnancy can also help reduce transmission to newborns during delivery.

How can herpes be prevented?

Abstaining from sexual contact is the only definite way to prevent transmission of HSV. Choosing a mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and is known to be uninfected is another effective prevention method. Using a condom every time can help reduce the chance of spreading the virus. If you and your partner have been together for some time, you both most likely have the virus, and condom use is probably not necessary (if you are monogamous). Persons with herpes should abstain from sexual activity with uninfected partners when lesions or other symptoms of herpes are present, although it is important to know that even if a person does not have any symptoms he or she can still infect sex partners.