



# GENITAL HERPES

## What is Genital Herpes?

Genital Herpes is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). It is very common. One in five people are infected with HSV. There are two types of the virus and both can cause genital herpes although: HSV-1 is the usual cause of cold sores. HSV-2 is the usual cause of infection in the genital or anal area.

Once a person is infected with HSV the virus never completely goes away and keeps returning (recurring).

## How is Genital Herpes spread?

Genital Herpes is passed on:

By having skin contact, vaginal, anal or oral sex with someone who is infected with HSV.  
From mother to baby during birth.

## What are the signs and symptoms?

HSV can cause painful blisters full of fluid on or near the genitals or anus surrounded by red painful skin. The number of blisters can vary from one or two up to several dozen when a person is first infected. The blisters burst to leave sores that eventually heal. As they heal, the sores may be itchy.

Some people with HSV never develop signs or symptoms but can pass the virus on to their partners.

## How will I know if I have Genital Herpes?

Different people are affected by Genital Herpes in different ways.

Symptoms may develop 2 to 20 days after contact with HSV or maybe not until months or years later.

The illness may cause:

Influenza-like symptoms, ie, fever, headache, muscle ache.  
Pain when urinating.  
Painful enlarged glands in the groin.  
Pain in the genital area.

This can last several weeks if not treated. In some people the symptoms are very mild. When the symptoms return (recur) the illness is usually less severe and does not last as long.

## Why does Genital Herpes recur?

Once a person has HSV, it travels down the nerves connected to the affected area. It stays there without any symptoms until it is reactivated.

Some people have found that something triggers HSV to come back. Triggers can include being premenstrual, tired, stressed and using alcohol and other drugs excessively.

## How often does Genital Herpes recur?

Some people can have very frequent attacks of 12 or more a year. Others have them once or twice a year. Some people may not get an attack for many years. The attacks are less severe and less frequent as times goes on. Some people who have HSV never develop any symptoms but can still pass the virus on.

## **What happens when Genital Herpes recurs?**

Before an attack people may get a variety of symptoms. These may include:

Tingling where the sores will develop.  
Feeling irritable.  
Pains in the thighs, buttocks or groin.  
Feeling unwell.

The blisters usually last a few hours and then burst to leave sores that heal within four to 10 days.  
The blisters and sores usually occur on the genitals, thighs and buttocks.

See your doctor early to start treatment.

## **Can Genital Herpes be treated?**

Yes, Genital Herpes can be treated.

Treatment needs to start as soon as possible.

For advice, testing and treatment visit your:

Student Health Clinic or school nurse.  
Sexual Health Clinic.  
Family Planning Association (FPA) Centre.  
Your doctor.

Genital Herpes can be treated by tablets called Aciclovir which:

Reduce the number of outbreaks.

Speed up the healing time.

Aciclovir has few or no side effects but may cause mild nausea and headache in some people.

Keep the infected area:

Clean and dry.

Bathe once a day in salty water (dry the infected area gently and thoroughly).

Aspirin, paracetamol or an anaesthetic gel/jelly may help with the pain.

As the infection is caused by a virus, the treatment will help the symptoms but not cure Genital Herpes.

The only way to know for sure you have Genital Herpes is to get tested.

The Herpes virus can be passed on through skin-on-skin contact with the genital area not covered or protected by the condom.

## **What happens at the test for Genital Herpes?**

The doctor will talk to you, examine you and discuss treatment.

A swab test will be taken by pressing the swab against any sores or blisters.

The specimen will then be sent to the laboratory for testing.

If you have Genital Herpes you should also be checked for other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs).

## **How can I protect myself from Genital Herpes?**

Using condoms every time you have sex reduces the risk of getting Genital Herpes.

Always use a condom if you are having sex with a new or casual partner.

Condoms also help protect you from other Sexually Transmitted Infections.

Always use a condom if you or your partner have Genital Herpes but no symptoms.

If you or your partner have Genital Herpes and have symptoms (ie, tingling or pain in the genital area) or blisters or sores it is best not to have sex. The virus can be passed on by having close skin-on-skin contact.

## **Do I tell my partner I have Genital Herpes?**

Yes, your partner may have developed symptoms and need to be tested.

If you need help to tell your partner, speak to a doctor, nurse or sexual health counsellor or call the herpes hotline.

Your partner may have given you Genital Herpes and not know they have the infection.

## **How will Genital Herpes affect me if I am pregnant?**

If you are pregnant and develop Genital Herpes for the first time it is serious. See your doctor immediately. A great deal of virus is present at this time.

If you develop Genital Herpes for the first time near delivery you may need a caesarean section to avoid infecting the baby.

If you have had previous attacks of Genital Herpes, you will usually be able to have a normal vaginal delivery.

However, if Herpes blisters or sores are present, a caesarean section may be recommended so that your baby will not come into contact with the infection.

## **How can I cope with Genital Herpes?**

Learning to live with Herpes can be difficult. Thousands of New Zealanders have the virus, so you are not alone.

If you have Herpes, talk to your doctor about management options that can include:

Medication.

Reducing stress.

Eating well and exercising regularly.

Getting better sleep.

Controlling your use of alcohol, cigarettes and other drugs.

Find out what triggers your Genital Herpes.

Contact the Herpes support group.