

What You Should Know About ...

Herpes

See Glossary section for definitions of underlined words.

What is herpes?

- Herpes is a virus that can cause sores on your body that are often painful.
- There are two types of the virus:
 1. The cold sore. These cold sores appear on or around the mouth area
 2. Genital herpes. This is sexually transmitted and causes sores that occur on or around the genitals.

What is the difference between these 2 types of herpes?

- Type 1 or Herpes Simplex Virus I (HSV I) is generally a fever blister or cold sore on or near the mouth.
- Type 2 or Herpes Simplex Virus II (HSV II) is the most common genital herpes that causes sores on or around the genitals.
- However, the two types are very similar and both can cause mouth or genital herpes.

How do I get herpes?

- Herpes is spread by skin-to-skin contact with an infected person.
- Herpes can be passed from genital to mouth and mouth to genital. So if you have a cold sore and have oral sex it can be passed to the genitals.
- Pregnant women can pass herpes to their newborn babies. This can be serious for the newborn.
- You can pass the virus to your sex partner even when you do not have any sores or never had any sores. Always use a condom. Remember that areas of skin not covered by a condom are not protected. Female condoms cover more area around the genitals than male condoms. Never use both at once. They can break.

What happens when I contract herpes?

- The first or "primary" outbreak is usually more severe and lasts longer than later or "recurrent" outbreaks.
- It can also vary from person to person. It may be so mild that you will not notice it.

What are the symptoms for women during the first outbreak of herpes?

At first, women experience:

- pain in the genital or anal area
- pain during urination (peeing)
- flu-like feeling (fever, aches in joints and muscles)
- a general feeling of ill health.

Over the next 2-7 days the symptoms may become worse:

- A painful swelling occurs in the lymph glands of the groin and or around the neck
- An area of skin in the genital area reddens. One or several small, painful, fluid-filled blisters may appear on or in the inner or outer lips of the vagina, the vagina, urethra, cervix, perineum, anus, buttocks or thighs
- Other symptoms may include:
 - unusual vaginal discharge
 - pain and discharge in the anal area and bleeding and pain during a bowel movement.

What are symptoms for men during the first outbreak?

At first men experience:

- pain in the genital or anal area
- flu-like feeling (fever, aches in joints and muscles).

Over the next 2-7 days the symptoms may become worse:

- Painful swelling occurs in the lymph glands of the groin
- Painful, fluid-filled blisters surrounded by red, inflamed skin may appear in or on the head/shaft/foreskin of the penis, the urethra, scrotum, perineum, buttocks, anus or thighs
- Men may experience painful urination (peeing) or discharge from the penis
- They may also experience pain and anal discharge, or bleeding and pain during a bowel movement.

What happens during the healing process?

- The blisters break, leaving painful open sores, which may last for up to 2 or more weeks.
- The sores may form scabs that fall off to leave normal skin. You may feel itchy in the affected area.
- You may feel tired and listless for several weeks after the start of the outbreak.

How long does a primary outbreak last?

- Women may start to get better after 7-10 days. The entire outbreak may last from 1-4 weeks if not treated.
- For men, the entire outbreak may last 1-3 weeks if not treated.

How are later outbreaks different from the first?

- Any repeat outbreak will probably be less severe and last less time than the first outbreak.
- Generally, herpes sores on the outer genitals and anus are present but sores inside the cervix, anus and urethra are uncommon.
- Usually, the recurrent outbreaks last around 5-10 days.

How can I tell if I have herpes?

- See your health care provider at once if you have any of the symptoms. He/she will diagnose herpes based on your medical history, the appearance of herpes sores, and laboratory tests.
- A swab (Q tip) that takes a sample from the sore will confirm the diagnosis. See your health care provider before sores are healed.

Can herpes be cured so that I never have another outbreak?

- There is currently no cure for herpes.
- Medications are available by prescription. These will speed the healing of lesions or sores during outbreaks. They will also help prevent or decrease outbreaks before they happen.

How does the treatment work?

There are two types of treatment:

- You can take medication during an outbreak to speed healing of blisters, shorten the pain and discomfort, and reduce viral shedding. Viral shedding is the contagious stage. If this treatment is started before the appearance of any sores, it may prevent sores from happening.
- You can take medication to help prevent outbreaks of genital herpes before they happen. If taken every day, this may prevent outbreaks before they start. It also helps reduce the risk of spreading herpes to a sexual partner.

What can I do to ease pain?

- Keep sores clean by washing with a no-tear shampoo or mild non-perfumed soap and lukewarm water.
- Apply an icepack to the sore when resting to numb the pain.
- Urinate in warm water if it burns when you pee. Take a bath or shower. Sit in a bowl of warm water or pour warm water over your genitals.
- Wear loose-fitting cotton underwear. Avoid tight-fitting clothing, nylon underwear and pantyhose, which trap moisture.

What should I not do?

- Do not apply ointments and creams that contain cortisone.
- Never pick at your sores as it interferes with the healing process. The virus may spread from your fingers to other parts of your body.
- Do not bandage herpes sores, as dry air helps them heal.

Can I ever predict when an outbreak is about to happen?

You can not tell for sure when you will have your next outbreak. However, “triggers” can lead to outbreaks. Knowing these may help. Triggers include:

- stress (emotional and physical)
- hormonal changes (getting your period)
- sex
- sunlight on the affected area
- poor eating habits
- lack of sleep
- a weakened immune system (following surgery, fever or illness such as colds).

How can I prevent contracting or spreading the herpes virus?

- Always use condoms with every partner.
- Avoid skin-to-skin contact, if you or your partner(s) have a cold sore or sores on or around the genital area. This includes kissing, and oral, vaginal and anal sex. Even touching a herpes sore and then touching a moist area on your body is enough to spread the virus.
- Practice good hand washing and personal hygiene. Don't share towels, pillowcases, drinks, forks or toothbrushes.
- If you or your partner suspect you have herpes, make an appointment to see a health care practitioner.

Where can I get tested?

- Your regular doctor.
- Walk-in clinic.
- Local teen clinic (if you are a teenager).

Where can I get more information?

- From your health care provider, community health clinic, or public health nurse.
- From the Facts of Life On-Line: e-mail your questions to thefactsoflife@serc.mb.ca.

Glossary:

Anus – The opening to the rectum (in the bum).

Cervix – The lower part of the uterus that opens into the vagina. It is also called the “neck of the uterus”.

Discharge – The release of any substance from anywhere on the body.

Genitals – The external sex organs (vulva on a female and penis and scrotum on a male). Often referred to as “private parts”.

Penis – The external male sex organ, used for urination (peeing) and sexual intercourse.

Perineum – The external region between anus and vagina. It is also called the pelvic floor.

Scrotum – The sac of skin that holds the testicles.

Vagina – The muscular tube inside a woman’s body where the menstrual blood comes out from the uterus, where a baby comes out from the uterus during childbirth, and where a penis can go in for vaginal intercourse.

Urethra – The tube that carries urine from the bladder to the outside of the body.