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 (Type 1): These cold sores appear on or around the mouth area
  2. Genital herpes (Type 2): 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) generally 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 area (e.g. mouth to mouth, mouth to genitals...).
- Herpes can be passed from genitals to mouth and mouth to genitals. If you have a cold sore and perform 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 have never had any sores.

What happens when I get 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 of genital herpes?

Many people have no symptoms, or only mild symptoms. For those with symptoms, they may include:

- Itchiness of genitals.
- Small blisters in the vaginal or on the vulva or cervix; on or around the penis or testicles; on or around the anus; or on the thigh or buttocks.
- Blisters often burst leaving painful sores. These sores may end up leaving scabs which may fall off.
- Tender lumps on the groin (especially at the time if the first episode/outbreak).
- The first outbreak may be accompanied by flu like feelings (fever, aches in joints and muscles).
- Painful urination.
- A slight tingling or burning may be a sign that an outbreak is coming.
How can I tell if I have herpes?

- See your health care provider at once if you have any of the symptoms. They 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. 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.

How can I manage the symptoms of genital herpes?

- 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.
- Drinking lots of fluid can help decrease pain during urination
- Wear loose-fitting cotton underwear. Avoid tight-fitting clothing, nylon underwear and pantyhose, which trap moisture.
- A healthy lifestyle may reduce the likelihood of outbreaks

What should I not do?

- Do not apply ointments and creams that contain cortisol.
- 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 (i.e. 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 getting or spreading the herpes virus?

- Always use condoms with every partner.
- Remember that areas of skin not covered by a condom are not protected. Female/internal condoms cover more area around the genitals than male/external condoms. Never use both at once. They can break.
- 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 suspects 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”.

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.

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.

Viral Shedding – The virus travels up to the skin’s surface and can be passed to another person by skin to skin contact.