What you should know about Genital Herpes

What is herpes?

Herpes is an infection caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). HSV can cause sores around the mouth ("oral herpes") and the genitals ("genital herpes"). HSV-1 is the usual cause of oral herpes, and HSV-2 is the usual cause of genital herpes. But either type of HSV can infect any area of the body.

How common is herpes?

Herpes is very common. About one in four American adults has genital herpes caused by HSV-1 or HSV-2.

How do people get herpes?

Herpes is spread by direct, skin-to-skin contact. Genital herpes is almost always spread through sexual contact. Herpes is easily spread in and around the vagina, penis and anus. Herpes may also be spread between the mouth and the sex organs during oral sex. People with herpes are most likely to transmit the virus when sores are present, but **herpes can also be spread when sores are not present.** People often transmit herpes without even knowing they have it.

What are the symptoms?

The first symptoms of genital herpes often appear within two weeks, but this can vary widely.

Symptoms may include:

- Sores, bumps, blisters or a rash in the genital area
- Pain or itching around the genitals, buttocks or legs
- Itching or burning during urination
- Swollen lymph nodes in the groin
- Fever, headache, or fatigue

This first "outbreak" of herpes will usually last 2-4 weeks, but this may vary. Some people have very painful symptoms during their first outbreak. Others may not notice symptoms at all. Many people have repeat outbreaks from time to time. The symptoms of repeat outbreaks are often milder than those of the first outbreak and tend to occur in the same place. Repeat outbreaks are hard to predict. However, they may be related to stress, diet, illness, menstruation and sunburn.

How do I know if I have herpes?

If you think you have herpes, see a doctor while symptoms are still present. During your exam, a sample may be taken from the sore(s) and tested to see if the virus is present. This test works best when done within **48 hours** of the onset of symptoms. The test will not work if the sores have healed. Other symptoms, such as a yeast infection, may obscure the test result. There is a blood test that detects HSV antibodies (the body's response to herpes). This test cannot be used to confirm an active case of herpes and cannot tell whether or not you can pass it to others.

How is herpes treated?

There is currently no cure for herpes. However, there are drugs your doctor can prescribe that can make herpes outbreaks less painful and less frequent. Ask your doctor about these drugs. To aid the healing process, keep active herpes sores clean and dry. Applying ice packs may help. Taking 3-4 short baths a day in warm water with Epsom salts may also help. Do not touch other body parts with towels or washcloths used on the sores. Because people with herpes may also transmit the virus to other parts of their own body during an outbreak, good hygiene is crucial. Always wash your hands after using the bathroom or touching a herpes sore. Be sure your hands are clean before touching any area around your eyes.

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How can I avoid herpes?

The only sure way to avoid genital herpes is by not having vaginal, anal or oral sexual contact. Remember, herpes is spread by direct, skin-to-skin contact. Using latex condoms can reduce the risk of getting genital herpes. Keep in mind that condoms may not protect you if herpes occurs on a part of the body not covered by the condom.

How can I avoid spreading herpes to others?

- **Do not have vaginal, anal or oral sexual contact when any symptoms are present — not even with a condom.** Sexual contact during an outbreak puts your partner(s) at higher risk.
- **Use latex condoms every time you have sex between outbreaks.** While condoms do not provide 100% protection, they are the best prevention available for people who have sex. Condoms can also help prevent HIV and other STDs (sexually transmitted diseases).
- **Talk to your partner(s) about herpes before having sex.** Discuss what you will do to help prevent spreading herpes. The timing and words used to talk with partners will vary from person to person.

Can herpes increase the risk of getting HIV and other STDs?

Because herpes causes open sores around the sex organs, it can increase the risk of getting HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) by providing a point of entry into the body. Herpes may also increase the risk of getting other STDs.

What about pregnancy?

A mother who has active genital herpes when she delivers can pass the infection to her baby during birth. This is most likely to occur when the mother is newly infected. Although this is rare, herpes can be very serious, even fatal, for the baby. If you or your sex partner has herpes, discuss it with your doctor during your first prenatal care visit. This is important even if you've never had symptoms or haven't had an outbreak in a long time. You and your doctor can discuss the best way to protect your baby.

What about my personal life?

Most people who just found out they have herpes worry about how it will impact their personal life. Many people find living with herpes is not as bad as they thought it would be. Talking to a counselor, learning about new treatments and preventing new infections are a few steps that can help you learn to manage herpes.

For HIV/STD testing locations in Texas, call: 2-1-1

For other HIV/STD questions, call:
1 (800) CDC-INFO (English/Español)
1 (888) 232-6348 (TTY)

For more information, go to: www.dshs.state.tx.us/hivstd

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