

Genital Herpes

What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is an infection caused by the **herpes simplex virus**, or **HSV**. It is one of the most common **sexually transmitted infections (STIs)** in the world.

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that around 50 million people in the United States are infected with genital HSV.
- Genital herpes is caused by 2 types of herpes simplex viruses, called HSV-1 and HSV-2. HSV-2 is the most frequent cause of genital herpes. We used to think that HSV-1 only caused oral herpes, or sores near the mouth (“cold sores”), and HSV-2 only caused genital herpes, but now we know that either type may cause genital herpes.

How does genital herpes spread between people?

Genital herpes is spread through contact with an infected partner. If an infected partner has oral herpes, it may be spread through a cold sore, saliva (spit), or skin around the mouth. If an infected partner has genital herpes, it may be spread through an open sore, genital fluids, or skin in the genital area. Most partners (up to 80% of people with genital herpes) don’t know that they’re infected, because they may not notice their symptoms or they may have very mild symptoms.

What are the symptoms of genital herpes?

Genital herpes can cause fluid-filled blisters of different sizes on the genital skin. These blisters open up over the course of a few days.

- The first time you have genital herpes symptoms, called the **primary outbreak**, you’ll likely have blisters that open up into sores (also called

lesions) on the genital area. You may also notice that you have a low fever and swollen lymph nodes in your groin, or you might just feel unwell (similar to “flu-like” symptoms). These symptoms usually go away in about 7-10 days.

- Any future genital herpes outbreaks you have after the first episode will usually have milder symptoms, and they may not last as long.
- Some people may notice **prodromal symptoms**, or symptoms you have before the blistering lesions appear. This may include a feeling of burning or tingling on the genital skin.
- Remember, most partners (up to 80% of people with genital herpes) don't know that they're infected, because they may not notice their symptoms or they may have very mild symptoms.

What can cause a genital herpes outbreak?

- We don't always know what triggers (causes) an outbreak of blistering sores, and triggers are not the same for everyone. Anything that puts stress on your body, such as emotional stress, illness, or surgery, can make you more likely to have an outbreak.
- About 90% of people have another outbreak of genital herpes in the first year after they are diagnosed with HSV-2. Outbreaks will happen less often over time. HSV-1 tends to have fewer outbreaks than HSV-2.
- People who are **immunocompromised** (have a weakened immune system) are at a higher risk of frequent outbreaks.

How is genital herpes diagnosed?

- Your provider will do an examination. They will look at the genital skin on the outside (the vulva) as well as look inside the vagina with a speculum. The **speculum** is a medical tool a provider uses to look inside the vagina. If they find changes on your skin that look similar to genital

herpes, they will take a swab of the sore. They will send the swab to the laboratory to test it for the herpes simplex virus. This is the most accurate way to diagnose genital herpes.

- There is also a blood test that your provider can do to see if you have been exposed to the herpes simplex virus in the past. However, this test does not tell your healthcare provider if you will have an outbreak in the future, or if this outbreak will occur in the mouth or genital area. Because of this, we don't recommend this blood test for HSV as part of regular sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing.

What should I tell my sexual partners if I'm diagnosed with genital herpes?

Being open and honest is the best way to talk about this diagnosis with partners. This conversation can be hard, but it is important. Partners should be aware that they have been exposed so that they can watch for symptoms and get testing if they have symptoms. Sometimes including a healthcare provider can help with this conversation and answering questions.

- If you're concerned about telling your partners, you can use a free, online service that will send a message to your partners about their herpes exposure without telling them who it came from. Learn more at: TellYourPartner.org.

How is genital herpes treated?

- There is no cure for genital herpes. However, there are medications you can take when you have an outbreak that help to shorten the time that you have symptoms. These are called antiviral medications and include Acyclovir®, Valacyclovir®, and Famciclovir®. These medications are taken by mouth, and they are prescribed by your provider.

- Another treatment option is to take these medications every day, even if you don't have an active outbreak. This is called **suppressive therapy**. This can be a good treatment option for people who have frequent outbreaks or who are immunocompromised. You may also choose to take suppressive therapy even if you do not have outbreaks often. Suppressive therapy can reduce your risk of spreading genital herpes to your sexual partners.



How might genital herpes affect pregnancy?

- The greatest risk related to genital herpes and pregnancy is with a primary outbreak during pregnancy. While it is rare, it is possible that a genital herpes infection that first presents in pregnancy could lead to miscarriage, a premature birth, or an infection in the baby. If you think you have a genital herpes infection in pregnancy, it's important that you contact your healthcare provider as soon as possible.
- If you have a history of genital herpes, your healthcare provider will prescribe an oral antiviral medication when you are 36 weeks pregnant to reduce your risk of having an outbreak during childbirth.
- Once you're about to give birth, your doctor will check to make sure you do not have a genital herpes sore. If you do have a sore, they will recommend that you have a Cesarean birth (or C-section) because of the risk of spreading the herpes virus to the baby.
- If you are pregnant and you have a history of genital herpes, it is important to talk about this with your healthcare provider at your first prenatal (pregnancy) appointment.

What can I do to prevent myself from getting or spreading genital herpes?

- Use condoms or dental dams during sexual activity.
 - Latex, polyisoprene, polyurethane, or nitrile condoms and dental dams are recommended. Lambskin condoms do not protect against sexually transmitted infections, including genital herpes.
- Taking antiviral medications reduces your risk of transmission (spreading the infection), but it does not completely remove this risk. Because of this, we still recommend using condoms or dental dams every time you have sex.
- We don't recommend using spermicide (as a gel, foam, or lubricant), as it can cause vaginal irritation and fissures (small cuts in the vagina) and increase the risk of vaginal infections.
- Do not have sexual contact (including oral, vaginal, or anal sex) with someone with open sores in those areas.

Where can I find more information on genital herpes?

Resource	QR code
International Society for the Study of Vulvovaginal Disease Patient Education www.issvd.org/resources/genital-herpes	
Center for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov/std/herpes/default.htm	

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