

# Genital Herpes - CDC Fact Sheet



You can get genital herpes even if your partner has no symptoms



## What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the herpes simplex viruses type 1 (HSV-1) or type 2 (HSV-2).

## How common is genital herpes?

Genital herpes infection is common in the United States. Nationwide, 16.2%, or about one out of six, people aged 14 to 49 years have genital HSV-2 infection. Over the past decade, the percentage of persons with genital herpes infection in the United States has remained stable.

Transmission from an infected male to his female partner is more likely than from an infected female to her male partner. Because of this, genital HSV-2 infection is more common in women (approximately one out of five women aged 14 to 49 years) than in men (about one out of nine men aged 14 to 49 years).

## What are the symptoms of genital herpes?

Most individuals infected with HSV-1 or HSV-2 experience either no symptoms or have very mild symptoms that go unnoticed or are mistaken for another skin condition. Because of this, most people infected with HSV-2 are not aware of their infection. When symptoms do occur, they typically appear as one or more blisters on or around the genitals, rectum or mouth. The blisters break and leave painful sores that may take two to four weeks to heal. Experiencing these symptoms is sometimes referred to as having an "outbreak." The first time someone has an outbreak they may also experience flu-like symptoms such as fever, body aches and swollen glands.

Repeat outbreaks of genital herpes are common, in particular during the first year of infection. Symptoms of repeat outbreaks are typically shorter in duration and less severe than the first outbreak of genital herpes. Although the infection can stay in the body indefinitely, the number of outbreaks tends to decrease over a period of years.

## How do people get genital herpes?

People get herpes by having sex with someone who has the disease. "Having sex" means anal, vaginal, or oral sex. HSV-1 and HSV-2 can be found in and released from the sores that the viruses cause. The viruses can also be released from skin that does not appear to have a sore. Generally, a person can only get HSV-2 infection during sexual contact with someone who has a genital HSV-2 infection. Transmission can occur from an infected partner who does not have a visible sore and may not know that he or she is infected.

HSV-1 can cause sores in the genital area and infections of the mouth and lips, so-called "fever blisters." HSV-1 infection of the genitals is caused by mouth to genital or genital to genital contact with a person who has HSV-1 infection.

## What are the complications of genital herpes?

Genital herpes can cause painful genital sores in many adults and can be severe in people with suppressed immune systems. If a person with genital herpes touches their sores or the fluids from the sores, they may transfer herpes to another part of the body. This is particularly problematic if it is a sensitive location such as the eyes. This can be avoided by not touching the sores or fluids. If they are touched, immediate and thorough hand-washing make the transfer less likely.

Some people who contract genital herpes have concerns about how it will impact their overall health, sex life, and relationships. It is best to talk to a health care provider about those concerns, but it also is important to recognize that while herpes is not curable, it is a manageable condition. Since a genital herpes diagnosis may affect perceptions about existing or future sexual relationships, it is important to understand how to talk to sexual partners about STDs. One resource, GYT Campaign, can be found here: <http://www.cdcnpin.org/stdawareness/GYT.aspx>.

There are also potential complications for a pregnant woman and her unborn child. See "How does herpes infection affect a pregnant woman and her baby?" below for information about this.

National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention  
Division of STD Prevention



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## What is the link between genital herpes and HIV?

Genital herpes can cause sores or breaks in the skin or mucous membranes (lining of the mouth, vagina, and rectum). The genital sores caused by herpes can bleed easily. When the sores come into contact with the mouth, vagina, or rectum during sex, they increase the risk of HIV transmission if either partner is HIV-infected.

## How does genital herpes affect a pregnant woman and her baby?

It is crucial that pregnant women infected with HSV-1 or HSV-2 go to prenatal care visits and tell their doctor if they have ever experienced any symptoms of, been exposed to, or been diagnosed with genital herpes. Sometimes genital herpes infection can lead to miscarriage or premature birth. Herpes infection can be passed from mother to child resulting in a potentially fatal infection (neonatal herpes). It is important that women avoid contracting herpes during pregnancy.

A woman with genital herpes may be offered antiviral medication from 36 weeks gestation through delivery to reduce the risk of an outbreak. At the time of delivery a woman with genital herpes should undergo careful examination. If herpes symptoms are present at delivery, a cesarean delivery (also called a 'C-section') is usually performed.

## How is genital herpes diagnosed?

Health care providers can diagnose genital herpes by visual inspection if the outbreak is typical. Providers can also take a sample from the sore(s) and test it. Sometimes, HSV infections can be diagnosed between outbreaks with a blood test. A person should discuss such testing options with their health care provider.

## Is there a cure or treatment for genital herpes?

There is no treatment that can cure herpes. Antiviral medications can, however, prevent or shorten outbreaks during the period of time the person takes the medication. In addition, daily suppressive therapy (i.e., daily use of antiviral medication) for herpes can reduce the likelihood of transmission to partners.

## How can genital herpes be prevented?

Correct and consistent use of latex condoms can reduce the risk of genital herpes, because herpes symptoms can occur in both male and female genital areas that are covered or protected by a latex condom. However, outbreaks can occur in areas that are not covered by a condom.

The surest way to avoid transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, including genital herpes, is to abstain from sexual contact, or to be in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and is known to be uninfected.

Persons with herpes should abstain from sexual activity with partners when sores or other symptoms of herpes are present. It is important to know that even if a person does not have any symptoms, he or she can still infect sex partners. Sex partners of infected persons should be advised that they may become infected and they should use condoms to reduce the risk. Sex partners can seek testing to determine if they are infected with HSV.



### Where can I get more information?

Division of STD Prevention (DSTDP)  
<http://www.cdc.gov/std/>  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

### Personal health inquiries and information about STDs:

CDC-INFO Contact Center  
1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636)  
Email: [cdcinfo@cdc.gov](mailto:cdcinfo@cdc.gov)

### Resources:

CDC National Prevention Information Network (NPIN)  
<http://www.cdcnpin.org/scripts/index.asp>  
P.O. Box 6003  
Rockville, MD 20849-6003  
1-800-458-5231  
1-888-282-7681 Fax  
1-800-243-7012 TTY  
Email: [info@cdcnpin.org](mailto:info@cdcnpin.org)

American Social Health Association (ASHA)  
<http://www.ashastd.org/>  
P. O. Box 13827  
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-3827  
1-800-783-9877