

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by herpes simplex viruses. Many people with herpes have no signs of infection and do not know they have it.

Genital Herpes

There are 2 herpes simplex viruses that can cause infection:

- ◆ One causes most genital herpes.
- ◆ The other virus can also cause genital herpes but more often causes blisters of the mouth and lips (e.g., cold sores or fever blisters).

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that about 1 out of 6 people ages 14 to 49 have genital herpes.

Women are more easily infected with herpes than men.

How is it spread?

The herpes virus is spread by skin-to-skin contact with a person who has the herpes virus:

- ◆ Most often, from herpes sores or blisters.
- ◆ Less often, from normal looking skin where the virus first entered the body.
- ◆ During vaginal, anal, or oral sexual contact, or skin-to-skin contact. This may happen even without visible sores.
- ◆ The herpes virus enters the body through the:
 - Lining of the mouth.
 - Vagina.
 - Labia.
 - Regular skin that has small cracks or cuts.

People with a weak immune system can get a herpes infection more easily. A weak immune system is caused by some diseases (e.g., cancer, HIV/AIDS) and by some medicines used to treat serious diseases.

People who don't know they have herpes can still spread the virus to others.

What are signs of genital herpes in women?

Women who have the herpes virus may have no outbreaks or signs of infection. Many do not know they have the virus. Once you are infected, the virus stays in your nerve cells for life. When the virus is not active, there is no sign of infection. When the virus becomes active, a herpes outbreak occurs. Some women may not have any outbreaks or may have only one outbreak, while others may have multiple outbreaks.

First Outbreak

The first herpes outbreak often occurs within the 2 weeks after contracting the virus from an infected person. The first signs may include:

- ◆ Itching, tingling, or burning feeling in the vaginal or anal area.
- ◆ Flu-like symptoms, including fever.
- ◆ Swollen glands.
- ◆ Pain in the legs, buttocks, or vaginal area.
- ◆ A change in vaginal discharge.
- ◆ Headache.
- ◆ Painful or difficult urination.
- ◆ A feeling of pressure in the area below the stomach.

After a few days, painful sores, blisters, or ulcers may develop where the virus entered the body. These areas include:

- ◆ The vaginal or anal area.
- ◆ The mouth.
- ◆ Inside the vagina .
- ◆ On the cervix.
- ◆ In the urinary tract.
- ◆ On the buttocks or thighs.
- ◆ On other parts of your body where the virus has entered.

Sometimes the first outbreak will not occur until months or years after infection.

Other Outbreaks

After the first outbreak, you may have more outbreaks. For most, these outbreaks occur less often over time. The signs of herpes infection are usually milder than during the first outbreak, and they go away faster.

For people with a weak immune system, outbreaks can be severe and long-lasting.

See your health care provider to be tested if you have signs of herpes.

How do you know if you have genital herpes?

The only way to know if you have genital herpes is by a medical exam. Your health care provider can examine you and test for it. Lab samples are taken from a sore, blister, or blood. Your health care provider may ask to test you for other infections at the same time.

Tell current and most recent sex partners of your herpes infection.

How is it treated?

Genital herpes can be treated, but it cannot be cured. Anti-viral medicines can make outbreaks:

- ◆ Shorter.
- ◆ Less severe.
- ◆ Less frequent.

Living with genital herpes causes some people to:

- ◆ Feel embarrassed or ashamed.
- ◆ Worry about infecting a sexual partner.
- ◆ Worry that having herpes will affect relationships with sexual partners.
- ◆ Avoid dating or sexual relationships.

Most people with herpes are able to live with the virus and manage their outbreaks. Talking to trusted health care providers and friends can help. Your health care provider can talk to you about medicines that treat outbreaks and about ways to reduce the chance of passing the virus on to a sexual partner.

Medicines can help lower the chance that you will pass the virus to others.





If you have genital herpes, during outbreaks you should:

- ◆ Keep the infected area clean and dry.
- ◆ Avoid touching the sores or blisters.
- ◆ Clean hands after contact with the infected area.
- ◆ Avoid skin-to-skin contact from the time you first notice signs of herpes until the sores have healed.



For more on how to clean hands, see *Clean Hands* on page 119.

How can you avoid genital herpes?

Most women get genital herpes through sexual contact with a person who has herpes sores. You can get the virus without having sex. To avoid infection:

- ◆ Avoid skin-to-skin and sexual contact.
- ◆ Have safer sex:
 - Reduce the number of sexual partners.
 - Condoms, when used correctly, can reduce the risk of getting genital herpes. But, condoms may not cover all infected areas. Each time you have sex use a condom (male or female type):
 - Before vaginal sex.
 - Before anal sex.
 - Before oral sex.
 - Have sex with only one partner who does not have sex with others and does not have herpes.
- ◆ Know that other forms of birth control do not protect against herpes infection.



For more information, see *Safer Sex* on page 77.

What about pregnancy?

A pregnant woman who has genital herpes can pass the virus to her baby. A baby born with herpes might:

- ◆ Be born early.
- ◆ Have brain, skin, or eye problems.
- ◆ Not survive.

If you are pregnant, you should tell your health care provider if you have herpes. If you show any signs of herpes during pregnancy, tell your provider. Pregnancy can be managed safely if your health care provider knows about your herpes. Medicines can help babies born with herpes if they are treated right away.

For more on genital herpes see:

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA):

Herpes simplex virus

www.hiv.va.gov/patient/diagnosis/OI-herpes-simplex.asp

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

Genital Herpes – CDC Fact Sheet

www.cdc.gov/std/Herpes/STDFact-Herpes.htm

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID/NIH):

Genital Herpes

www.niaid.nih.gov/topics/genitalherpes/pages/default.aspx

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Office on Women's Health:

Genital herpes fact sheet

www.womenshealth.gov/faq/genital-herpes.cfm