



Herpes Fact Sheet

What is herpes?

Herpes is common sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). There are two types, HSV-1 and HSV-2. HSV-1 usually causes blisters and sores in the mouth and on the lips. HSV-2 usually causes blisters and sores on or around the genitals or anus.

How is herpes spread?

HSV-1 and HSV-2 can be found in and released from the sores that these viruses cause, but they also are released between outbreaks 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 genital herpes, but it more commonly causes infections of the mouth and lips, so-called "fever blisters." HSV-1 infection of the genitals can be caused by oral-genital or genital-genital contact with a person who has HSV-1 infection. Genital HSV-1 outbreaks recur less regularly than genital HSV-2 outbreaks.

What are the signs and symptoms of genital herpes?

Most people infected with HSV-2 are not aware of their infection. However, if someone does get symptoms, they can be painful. The first "outbreak" usually occurs within two weeks after the virus is transmitted. Sores typically heal within two to four weeks.

During the first "outbreak," people with HSV may get a second crop of sores, and flu-like symptoms, including fever and swollen glands. However, most individuals with HSV-2 infection never have sores, or they have very mild signs that they do not even notice or that they mistake for insect bites or another skin condition.

People diagnosed with a first episode of genital herpes can expect to have several (typically four or five) outbreaks within a year. Over time these recurrences usually decrease in frequency. It is possible that a person becomes aware of the "first episode" years after the infection is acquired.

How long after infection do symptoms appear?

Symptoms can appear anywhere from 2-12 days.

How long is a person with genital herpes contagious?

A person with genital herpes may infect others for years, possibly for his or her entire lifetime. People can may spread herpes even though they may have no symptoms.

Is there treatment for genital herpes?

There is no treatment that can cure herpes. Antiviral medications can shorten and prevent outbreaks during the period of time the person takes the medication. In addition, daily suppressive therapy for symptomatic herpes can reduce transmission to partners.

How can herpes be prevented?

You can reduce your risk of an STD by having one partner who is STD-free. Know your partner. Correct and consistent use of latex condoms can reduce the risk of genital herpes.

People with herpes should not have sex or sexual activity with partners when they have lesions or other herpes symptoms. Remember, even if you don't have any symptoms you can still infect your 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. A positive HSV-2 blood test



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most likely indicates a genital herpes infection.

Get yourself tested for STDs if you are at risk. Anyone in Illinois who is 12 or older can get tested without their parents' consent.