

# Genital herpes

## Introduction

Genital herpes is a common infection caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). It causes painful blisters on the genitals and the surrounding areas.

As genital herpes can be passed to others through intimate sexual contact, it is often referred to as a sexually transmitted infection (STI).

HSV can affect any mucous membrane (moist lining), such as those found in the mouth (cold sores).

Genital herpes is a chronic (long-term) condition. The virus remains in your body and can become active again. The average rate of recurrence is four to five times in the first two years after being infected. However, over time, it becomes active less frequently and each outbreak becomes less severe.

## The herpes simplex virus (HSV)

There are two types of herpes simplex virus (HSV), type 1 and type 2. Both types are highly contagious and can be passed easily from one person to another by direct contact. Genital herpes is usually transmitted by having sex (vaginal, anal or oral) with an infected person. Even if someone with genital herpes does not have any symptoms, it is possible for them to pass the condition on to a sexual partner.

At least 8 out of 10 people who carry the virus are unaware they have been infected because there are often few or no initial symptoms. However, certain triggers can activate the virus, causing an outbreak of genital herpes.

## Who is affected?

Genital herpes is a common condition, especially between people aged 20-24 years.

## Treating genital herpes

Although there is no cure for genital herpes, the symptoms can usually be controlled using antiviral medicines.

However, it is important to prevent the spread of genital herpes by avoiding sex until symptoms have cleared up and continuing to use a condom afterwards.

## Pregnancy

Genital herpes can cause problems during pregnancy. These complications can be more serious depending on whether you already have genital herpes, or develop it for the first time while pregnant.

## Symptoms of genital herpes

Most people with the herpes simplex virus (HSV) do not experience any symptoms of genital herpes when first infected and, as a result, they do not know they have the condition.

Symptoms may not appear until months or sometimes years after you are exposed to the virus.

If you experience symptoms when first infected, they usually appear four to seven days after you have been exposed to the virus. The symptoms are usually more severe first time around than in cases of recurrent infections.

### Primary infection

The symptoms of genital herpes for the first time include:

painful red blisters that burst to leave open sores around your genitals, rectum (back passage), thighs and buttocks

blisters and ulcers on the cervix (lower part of the womb) in women

vaginal discharge in women

pain when you pass urine

a high temperature (fever) of 38°C (100.4°F) or over

a general feeling of being unwell, with aches and pains

These symptoms may last up to 20 days. However, the sores will eventually scab and heal without scarring.

### Recurrent infections

Although the initial symptoms of genital herpes clear up, the virus remains dormant (inactive) in a nearby nerve. The virus may be reactivated from time to

time, travelling back down the nerve to your skin and causing recurrent outbreaks.

Symptoms of a recurrent outbreak may include:

a tingling, burning or itching sensation around your genitals, and sometimes down your leg, before blisters appear

painful red blisters that soon burst to leave sores around your genitals, rectum (back passage), thighs and buttocks

blisters and ulcers on the cervix (lower part of the womb) in women

Recurrent outbreaks are usually shorter and less severe. This is because your body has produced protective antibodies (proteins that fight infection) in reaction to the previous infection. Your body now recognises the virus and mounts a response that is able to fight HSV more effectively.

Over time, you should find any recurrent genital herpes infections become less frequent and less severe.

## Causes of genital herpes

Genital herpes is caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). The virus is very contagious and spreads from one person to another through skin-to-skin contact, such as during vaginal, anal or oral sex.

There are two types of HSV:

type 1 (HSV-1)

type 2 (HSV-2)

Genital herpes is caused by both type 1 and type 2 HSV.

Whenever HSV is present on the surface of your skin it can be passed on to a partner. The virus passes easily through the moist skin that lines your genitals, mouth and anus (the opening where solid waste leaves the body).

In some cases it is also possible to become infected by coming into contact with other parts of the body that can be affected by HSV, such as the eyes and skin. For example, you can catch genital herpes if you have oral sex with someone who has a cold sore. A cold sore is a blister-like lesion around the mouth that is also caused by HSV.

Genital herpes cannot usually be passed on through objects, such as towels, cutlery or cups because the virus dies very quickly when away from your skin. However, you may become infected by sharing sex toys with someone who has the virus.

Genital herpes is particularly easy to catch when an infected person has blisters or sores. However, it can be caught at any time, even when someone has no symptoms at all.

Once you have been infected with HSV, it can be reactivated every so often to cause a new episode of genital herpes. This is known as recurrence.

Recurrence triggers

It is not completely understood why HSV is reactivated, but certain triggers may be responsible for the symptoms of genital herpes recurring. For example, friction in your genital area during sexual intercourse may cause a recurrence.

Other possible triggers include:

being unwell

stress

drinking excess amounts of alcohol

exposure to ultraviolet light, for example, using sunbeds

surgery on your genital area

having a weakened immune system (the body's natural defence system), for example, as a result of having chemotherapy (treatment for cancer)

Diagnosing genital herpes

Genital herpes can be diagnosed more easily and accurately when the infection is still active, so you should seek medical attention as soon as you develop symptoms.

Primary infection

If you think you may have genital herpes for the first time (a primary infection), you should visit your local sexual health clinic (see below) as soon as possible. These are also called genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics.

Find your nearest sexual health service.

Wherever possible, an initial diagnosis of genital herpes should be made by a GUM specialist. If you cannot get to a GUM clinic, you should see your DOCTOR instead. They may refer you to a GUM specialist for a formal diagnosis and treatment.

When being tested for genital herpes you may also be asked:

whether you have experienced similar symptoms before

whether you have ever had a cold sore, which are also caused by the herpes simplex virus

whether you have ever had a sexually transmitted infection (STI)

about your history of sexual partners

A swab is used to collect a sample of fluid from a blister. A swab is a small piece of absorbent material, such as gauze or cotton, which is attached to the end of a stick or wire. The sample will be sent to a laboratory to be tested for the herpes simplex virus (HSV). You may also be screened for other STIs.

You should be aware that even if your swab result comes back negative for HSV, you may still have genital herpes and a diagnosis will only be confirmed by any recurrent outbreaks.

### Treating genital herpes

### Preventing genital herpes

If you have genital herpes, it is important to avoid having sexual intercourse, including vaginal, anal and oral sex, until all your blisters and ulcers have cleared up.

You should also avoid sharing towels or flannels with others to ensure that you do not spread the herpes simplex virus (HSV).

Treatment for genital herpes will depend on whether you have the infection for the first time (a primary infection) or your symptoms keep coming back (a recurrent outbreak).

#### Primary infection

If you have genital herpes for the first time, see your DOCTOR or visit your local GUM clinic (also called sexual health clinics). They may prescribe antiviral tablets, such as aciclovir, which you will need to take five times a day. Aciclovir works by preventing HSV from multiplying. However, it does not clear the virus from your body completely and does not have any effect once you stop taking it.

You will need to take a course of aciclovir for at least five days, or longer if you still have new blisters and open sores forming on your genital area when your treatment begins.

Aciclovir can cause some side effects, including being sick and headaches. Other antiviral medications that may be used to treat genital herpes include famciclovir and valaciclovir.

## Recurrent outbreaks

You should visit your DOCTOR if you have been diagnosed with genital herpes before and are experiencing a recurrent outbreak.

If the symptoms are mild, your DOCTOR may suggest things you can do at home to help ease your symptoms without the need for treatment.

Keep the affected area clean using either plain or salt water. This will help prevent blisters or ulcers from becoming infected and may encourage them to heal quicker. It will also stop affected areas from sticking together.

Apply an ice pack wrapped in a flannel, or cold, wet, tea bags on the sores to help soothe pain and speed up the healing process. Do not apply ice directly to the skin.

Apply petroleum jelly, such as Vaseline, or an anaesthetic (painkilling) cream to any blisters or ulcers to reduce the pain when you pass urine.

Drink plenty of fluids to dilute your urine. This will make passing urine less painful. Passing urine while sitting in a bath or while pouring water over your genitals may also help.

Avoid wearing tight clothing because it may irritate the blisters and ulcers.

If your symptoms are more severe, you may be prescribed antiviral tablets (aciclovir), which you will need to take five times a day for five days.

## Episodic treatment

If you have fewer than six recurrent outbreaks of genital herpes in a year, your DOCTOR may prescribe a five-day course of aciclovir each time you experience tingling or numbness before symptoms begin. This is known as episodic treatment.

## Suppressive treatment

If you have more than six recurrent outbreaks of genital herpes in a year, or if your symptoms are particularly severe and causing you distress, you may need to take aciclovir every day as part of a long-term treatment plan.

This is known as suppressive treatment and aims to prevent further outbreaks developing. In this instance, it is likely you will need to take aciclovir twice a day for 6 to 12 months.

It is important to note that while suppressive treatment can reduce the risk of passing HSV on to your partner, it cannot prevent it altogether. Your DOCTOR may refer you for specialist advice if you are concerned about transmitting the virus to your partner.

Suppressive treatment will usually be stopped after 12 months. As long as recurrent outbreaks of genital herpes are infrequent and mild, you will only need to take a five-day course of aciclovir as and when it is needed. Episodes of recurrent genital herpes usually become less frequent and less severe after around two years.

Suppressive treatment may be restarted if you have further outbreaks that are severe. Your DOCTOR may refer you for specialist treatment if you continue to have outbreaks of genital herpes while you are having suppressive treatment.

### HIV and genital herpes

If you are experiencing recurrent outbreaks of genital herpes you should also consider being tested for HIV. This may be a sign of a weakened immune system (the body's natural defence against infection and illness), which may indicate you have HIV.

If you have HIV and genital herpes you will be referred to a GUM specialist. This is because genital herpes can be a more serious condition in people with HIV.

### Complications of genital herpes

In rare cases, the blisters caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV) can become infected by other bacteria. If this happens, it could cause a skin infection to spread to other parts of your body.

### Genital herpes and pregnancy

In some instances, the herpes virus can pose problems during pregnancy and may be passed to the baby around the time of the birth.

#### Existing genital herpes

If you had genital herpes before becoming pregnant, the risk to your baby is very low. This is because during the last few months of your pregnancy, you will pass all the protective antibodies (proteins that fight infection) to your baby. These will protect your baby during the birth and for several months afterwards. Even if you have recurrent episodes of genital herpes throughout your pregnancy, your baby should not be at increased risk. However, you may need

to take an antiviral medication, such as aciclovir, continuously from week 36 of the pregnancy until the birth to reduce the severity of your symptoms.

If you have genital herpes blisters or ulcers (open sores) at the time of the birth, the chance of passing the infection on to your baby is up to 3 in 100.

#### First and second trimester

If you develop genital herpes for the first time (primary infection) during the first or second trimester, which is up to week 26 of the pregnancy, you may be at risk of having a miscarriage (losing the pregnancy). There is also an increased risk of passing the virus on to your baby.

To prevent this, you may need to take antiviral medicine, such as aciclovir, while you are pregnant.

#### Third trimester

If you develop genital herpes for the first time during the third trimester (week 27 of the pregnancy until birth), particularly during the last six weeks of the pregnancy, the risk of passing the virus on to your baby is considerably higher. This is because you will not have time to develop protective antibodies to pass to your baby, and the virus can be passed to your baby before or during the birth. To prevent this happening, you may need to have a caesarean section delivery. A caesarean section is an operation to deliver your baby by making a cut in the front wall of your abdomen (tummy) and womb. If you give birth vaginally, the risk of passing the virus on to your baby is around 4 in 10.

If you develop genital herpes during the latter stages of pregnancy, you will need to take antiviral medicine continuously for the last four weeks of your pregnancy. However, this may not prevent the need for a caesarean.

#### Neonatal herpes

Neonatal herpes is where a baby catches the herpes simplex virus around the time of the birth. It can be serious and, in some cases, fatal.

There are three types of neonatal herpes that affect different parts of the body.

Neonatal herpes can affect:

the eyes, mouth and skin

the central nervous system (brain, nerves and spinal cord)

multiple organs

In babies with symptoms affecting only their eyes, mouth or skin, most will make a complete recovery with antiviral treatment. However, the condition is

much more serious in cases where multiple organs are affected and nearly a third of infants with this type of neonatal herpes will die.

### Preventing genital herpes

The following advice can help prevent the herpes simplex virus (HSV) spreading to others.

#### Avoid having sex

If you have genital herpes, avoid having sex (vaginal, anal and oral) until any blisters or ulcers (open sores) around your genital area have cleared up. It is best not to have sex if you have symptoms of genital herpes because at this point the condition is highly contagious, even from the first tingle or itch.

Avoid sharing sex toys as they can also pass on sexually transmitted infections (STIs). If you do share them, make sure you wash them and cover with a condom.

You should also avoid kissing your partner if either of you have a cold sore around your mouth.

#### Always use a condom

Always use a condom while having any kind of sexual intercourse (vaginal, anal and oral), even after your symptoms have gone. This is particularly important when having sex with new partners.

However, while using a condom may help prevent genital herpes from spreading, the condom only covers the penis. If the virus is also present on or around your anus (the opening where solid waste leaves the body), it can still be passed on through sexual contact.

As HSV survives within the nerves of your skin, the virus may still be present on your skin after you no longer have any symptoms. This means there is still a chance you could pass it to someone else.

#### Testing your partner

If you have genital herpes, and your partner experiences symptoms, they should be encouraged to visit a genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinic (also called sexual health clinics) so they can be tested for the condition. A first case of genital herpes (a primary infection) often develops some time after exposure to the virus, so they may be unaware they are infected.

Avoid sharing towels or flannels

Although it is very unlikely HSV would survive on an object long enough to be passed on to someone else, it is a good idea to take precautions to prevent this from happening. Therefore, avoid sharing towels or flannels to ensure you do not spread HSV to others.