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Genital Herpes

What Is It?

Genital herpes is caused by a virus called herpes simplex (HSV). There are two different types of herpes virus that cause genital herpes — HSV-1 and HSV-2. Most forms of genital herpes are HSV-2. But a person with HSV-1 (the type of virus that causes cold sores or fever blisters around the mouth) can transmit the virus through oral sex to another person's genitals.

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted disease (STD). It causes herpes sores in the genital area and is transmitted through vaginal, oral, or anal sex, especially from unprotected sex when infected skin touches the vaginal, oral, or anal area. Occasionally, it can cause sores in the mouth, and can be spread by secretions in saliva. Because the virus does not live outside the body for long, you cannot catch genital herpes from an object, such as a toilet seat.

Symptoms of a Genital Herpes Outbreak

Someone who has been exposed to the genital herpes virus may not be aware of the infection and may never have an outbreak of sores. However, if a person does have an outbreak, the symptoms can cause significant discomfort.

Someone with genital herpes may first notice itching or pain, followed by sores that appear a few hours to a few days later. The sores, which may appear on the vagina, penis, scrotum, buttocks, or anus, start out as red bumps that soon turn into red, watery blisters. The sores may make it very painful to urinate. The sores may open up, ooze fluid or bleed, and then heal within the next 2 to 4 weeks.

The entire genital area may feel very tender or painful, and the person may have flu-like symptoms including fever, headache, and swollen lymph nodes. If someone has an outbreak in the future, it will tend to be less severe and shorter in duration, with the sores healing in about 10 days.

How Long Until Symptoms Appear?

Someone who has been exposed to genital herpes will notice genital itching and/or pain about 2 to 20 days after being infected with the virus. The sores usually appear within days afterward.

What Can Happen?

After the herpes blisters disappear, a person may think the virus has gone away — but it's actually hiding in the body. Both HSV-1 and HSV-2 can stay hidden away in the body until the next herpes outbreak, when the virus reactivates itself and the sores return, usually in the same area.

Over time, the herpes virus can reactivate itself again and again, causing discomfort and episodes of sores each time. Sometimes a person has about four to five herpes outbreaks each year, but this can vary between people. Usually, the number of outbreaks will lessen over time.

There is **no** cure for herpes; it will always remain in the body and can always be passed to another person with any form of unprotected sex. This is the case even if blisters aren't present on the genitals, but more likely if they are. Many cases of genital herpes are transmitted when symptoms are not present, but a person can lessen the chance of spreading the infection to someone else by taking antiviral medication to lessen the amount of herpes virus that is around. This is a prescription medication that needs to be obtained from a doctor.

Genital herpes also increases the risk of HIV infection because HIV can enter the body more easily whenever there's a break in the skin (such as a sore) during unprotected sexual contact. In addition, if a pregnant woman with genital herpes has an active infection during childbirth, the newborn baby is at risk for getting herpes infection. This risk is greatest if she gets her first outbreak while pregnant. Herpes infection in a newborn can cause meningitis (an inflammation of the membranes that surround the brain and spinal cord), seizures, and brain damage.

How Is It Prevented?

The only surefire way to prevent genital herpes is **abstinence**. Teens who do have sex must properly use a latex condom every time they have any form of sexual intercourse (vaginal, oral, or anal sex). Girls receiving oral sex should have their partners use dental dams as protection. These sheets of thin latex can be purchased online or from many pharmacies.

If one partner has a herpes outbreak, avoid sex — even with a condom or dental dam — until all sores have healed. Herpes can be passed sexually even if a partner has no sores or other signs and symptoms of an outbreak. Finally, one way to lessen this risk is to take antiviral medication even when no sores are present if you know you have genital herpes.

How Is It Treated?

If you think you may have genital herpes or if you have had a partner who may have genital herpes, see your family doctor, adolescent doctor, gynecologist, or health clinic for a diagnosis.

Right now, there is no cure for genital herpes, but a doctor can prescribe antiviral medication to help control recurring HSV-2 and clear up the painful sores. The doctor can also tell you how to keep the sores clean and dry and suggest other methods to ease the discomfort when the virus reappears.

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