What you need to know about genital herpes

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that is most easily passed on by contact with infected skin during sex. Treatment can reduce symptoms, but the infection cannot be cured by medication. There are ways to lower the chance of getting or passing on genital herpes, such as using a condom each time you have sex.

The words we use here - CATIE is committed to using language that is relevant to everyone. People use different terms to describe their bodies. This text uses medical terms, such as vagina and penis, to describe genitals. Other people may use other terms, such as private parts or dick or front hole. CATIE acknowledges and respects that people use words that they are most comfortable with.

What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the herpes simplex virus. It can cause blisters on the genitals, anus, rectum, and/or lips and mouth. A person with genital herpes can pass it on to another person during sex.

Many people with genital herpes have no symptoms or they mistake the symptoms for another condition, so they don’t know they have an infection. When symptoms do occur, they can take up to 2 to 12 days to appear. Common symptoms can include:

- blisters (lesions), individually or in clusters, anywhere in the area of the genitals or anus; these blisters crust over and heal within one to two weeks
- itchy, tingly, burning or painful skin in infected areas
- pain in the legs or buttocks
- swollen lymph nodes in the groin
- watery discharge from the vagina
- fever, headache, muscle ache
- fatigue

Could I get genital herpes?

Anyone who is sexually active, including people who experience sexual violence, can get genital herpes.

Genital herpes is most easily passed on during sex without a condom; this includes vaginal intercourse and anal intercourse. A person with genital herpes can pass the infection even if they have no symptoms.

Genital herpes can also be passed on:

- when a person with a herpes virus infection in their mouth or throat gives oral sex to another person
- when a person gives oral sex to a person who has a herpes virus infection on their genitals
- through oral-anal contact (rimming)
- through sharing sex toys or during a hand job or fingering if infected fluids get onto the toy or hand

Genital herpes and HIV

For people with HIV, a genital herpes infection may increase the amount of HIV in bodily fluids and increase the chance of passing on HIV to sex partners.

Someone who has genital herpes may be more likely to get HIV if they are exposed to HIV during sex.

What can I do?
Prevent infection

People with genital herpes should avoid sexual contact when they are having an outbreak, that is, having blisters or tingling or burning in the skin, because this can reduce but not eliminate the risk of passing the infection on.

Use a condom during vaginal intercourse and anal intercourse. Condoms are only effective if the infected area is covered by the condom.

Use a condom or oral dam during oral sex.

There is no vaccine to protect against genital herpes.

Get tested

The only way to know for sure whether or not you have genital herpes is to get tested. A doctor or nurse can do the test. The test involves taking a swab of the fluids from a sore. Blood tests can also determine if someone has a herpes infection but are not able to determine whether it is an oral or genital infection.

It is a good idea to get tested for other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, when you get tested for genital herpes. Other STIs can be passed on in the same way as genital herpes. Talk to your healthcare provider about how often you should test for genital herpes or other STIs.

Get treated

Genital herpes cannot be cured with medication. However, if you have genital herpes, antiviral medications can help prevent outbreaks or reduce symptoms during an outbreak. For these medicines to work, it is important that you take them exactly as directed by your doctor.

During an outbreak, people can take over-the-counter pain medication, apply ice packs to the lesions, take warm baths with salt or baking soda and wear loose-fitting cotton underwear to help reduce pain or irritation.

Credits

This information sheet was developed in partnership with the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN).

Resource

Genital herpes - CATIE fact sheet
Decisions about particular medical treatments should always be made in consultation with a qualified medical practitioner knowledgeable about HIV- and hepatitis C-related illness and the treatments in question.

CATIE provides information resources to help people living with HIV and/or hepatitis C who wish to manage their own health care in partnership with their care providers. Information accessed through or published or provided by CATIE, however, is not to be considered medical advice. We do not recommend or advocate particular treatments and we urge users to consult as broad a range of sources as possible. We strongly urge users to consult with a qualified medical practitioner prior to undertaking any decision, use or action of a medical nature.

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Information on safer drug use is presented as a public health service to help people make healthier choices to reduce the spread of HIV, viral hepatitis and other infections. It is not intended to encourage or promote the use or possession of illegal drugs.

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