

Herpes is?

Herpes is caused by a virus called herpes simplex virus or HSV for short. There are two different types, HSV -1 and HSV -2. About five out of every ten people have HSV-1 which is usually on the mouth or face. About one in five sexually active people have genital herpes, which is usually HSV-2. Herpes type 1 or 2 can be on the face, often around the mouth which is known as 'cold sores' or 'fever blisters' or on the genital areas of the body. The virus is spread by skin to skin contact, for example by kissing or intimate sexual contact.

Index

How do I get tested?	page	4
How do I care for myself?	page	5
Treatment?	page	5
How might I feel?	page	6
Herpes and Pregnancy	page	6
Herpes and HIV?	page	8

Virus or Bacteria...what is the difference?

Viral infections like herpes and genital warts are different from bacterial infections such as Chlamydia or Gonorrhea. Bacterial infections can be treated with an antibiotic to remove the bacteria from the body. A viral infection does not respond to treatment with antibiotics. Viruses are able to go into normal cells and change how they work. We defend our body from viruses with a healthy immune system. Getting better from most viral infections can take days or weeks and usually the immune system is able to clear the virus from the body. The herpes virus is different because the herpes virus is not cleared by your immune system. The virus stays in the body and may cause symptoms (a change in your body that you see or feel). Symptoms are also referred to as an outbreak.

How is the herpes virus different?

The herpes virus is unique. This virus finds a way to hide from the immune system. It can be found in a nerve root called a "ganglion" (see Figure 1). Genital herpes stays in the ganglion located near the base of the spine. Oral/Facial herpes stays in the ganglion near the top of the spine. Sometimes the virus starts to move along a nerve and comes to the surface of the skin causing symptoms. Once the symptoms have stopped and the skin has healed the virus goes back along the nerve to the ganglion. The virus then stays quiet until something triggers it to move along the nerve to the surface of the skin causing another outbreak.

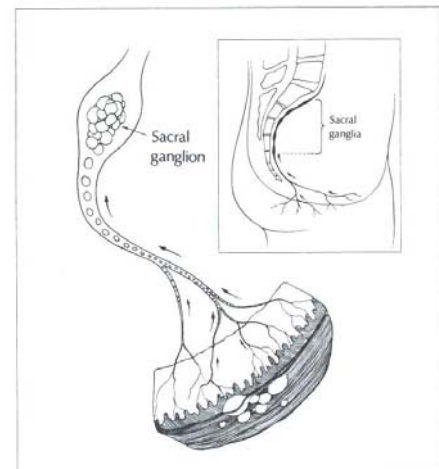


FIGURE 1. HSV retreats along the nerves and finds sanctuary in the sacral ganglia, shown here.

Herpes is? (cont'd)

What triggers an outbreak?

Every person has their own trigger(s) (reasons why herpes starts again). It is thought that stress to the body such as fatigue, illness, friction, or other irritation, may trigger an outbreak. It is important to learn about your body so you can know what causes herpes for you.

What are the symptoms of herpes?

Most people don't know that they have herpes. The symptoms of herpes and the symptoms of other types of infections may look the same. If you are infected with herpes the symptoms can range from none, to very mild or severe symptoms.

The symptoms and how long they last will be different for every person due to your body's response to the virus. You may notice some symptoms or changes in your body before you see anything different on your skin. This is common and is called a 'prodromal' symptom(s). Some people do not see any changes on their skin, while other people may have more than one symptom or change such as:

- Sores that look like water blisters, cuts, or broken skin
- Lots of sores (a cluster) or only one sore
- The skin can feel itchy, tingling, burning, raw, or painful
- Pain in your legs or buttocks
- The lymph nodes (glands that take fluid from the genital area, part of the immune system) in the groin can be swollen and tender
- Painful urination (peeing)
- Thin watery discharge from the vagina. The cervix (the opening to the uterus) is infected 80 to 90% of the time during a first outbreak. Sometimes only the cervix is infected. If this is the case a woman may not notice any other symptoms other than a change in her discharge.
- Fever, headache, or muscle aches
- Feel tired and not well

You will know your herpes outbreak is over when your skin looks normal and your body feels normal again.

Herpes is? (cont'd)

TYPES OF OUTBREAKS

A **TRUE PRIMARY INFECTION** is when a person is infected with the herpes virus for the first time and has symptoms. The symptoms may be very painful and your whole body may be involved.

A **NON PRIMARY INFECTION** is when a person has been infected with the herpes virus in the past but this is the first time they see symptoms. When the body has been infected in the past, the immune system reacts more quickly. You may have less pain and symptoms.

A **RECURRENT INFECTION** is when a person has symptoms that repeat, often in the same area of the body. These outbreaks of herpes are often less severe than the first outbreak. The sores can appear in the same area but they can also show up on a different part of the genital area.

How does herpes spread from one person to another person?

Genital herpes is spread by skin rubbing on the skin of another person who has the herpes virus. The herpes virus spreads most easily during an outbreak. You have more of the virus on your skin during this time.

People with genital herpes will have times when the virus is on the skin but they may only feel mild symptoms or they do not see any symptoms at all. This is called “**asymptomatic shedding**” or no clear symptoms. Asymptomatic shedding can happen at any time. How often this can occur will vary from person to person.

The spread of genital herpes usually occurs when a person is shedding but does not have any symptoms (asymptomatic shedding). Asymptomatic viral shedding occurs more often in genital type 2 herpes infections than in genital type 1 herpes infections. More viral shedding occurs in the first year after you become infected because there are usually more frequent outbreaks. Also you may shed the virus for longer periods of time during the first year you are infected. Use of a condom is recommended to reduce transmission of the herpes virus to an uninfected partner. If you are in a relationship, you may want to discuss risk of transmission, condom use and reach a decision that you and your partner are both comfortable with.

Herpes is? (cont'd)

How do you



the Spread?

If you have any symptoms or a herpes outbreak or visible sores, it is best not to have sex or any genital skin to skin contact until the areas are completely healed and feel normal again. This means: no mouth to genitals, genital to genital, mouth to anus, or penis to anus contact.

Using a male condom during sex at all times will give your partner some protection from the virus. The female condom provides wider genital coverage and may give more protection. For oral sexual contact, other barriers such as latex squares or dams cover more genital skin surface and may also help reduce transmission. There is one study to date that found that when a person with HSV-2 takes daily antiviral medication, there is much less transmission of herpes to an uninfected partner. You may wish to talk to your health care provider about this.

How do I get tested?

If you see symptoms of herpes or your health care provider has told you that you may have herpes, you can get a lab test. Contact a sexually transmitted infection clinic or doctor to talk about getting a test. There are several different tests used in British Columbia.

Herpes Culture/Skin Tests

A culture swab can tell you if you have the herpes virus and the specific type. The sores or skin surface will be swabbed to get virus from the skin. The culture test may not be able to detect the virus if the sores have begun to heal. It is important to have any sore(s) **swabbed within 72 hours** after you see symptoms to get the best results from the culture swab. If the sore is swabbed too late in the viral cycle, the herpes virus will not be found and the test result may read 'none found'. If you have had a swab in the past and no virus was found, and you have symptoms again, get a culture swab as soon as possible.

Herpes Blood Tests

1) Non Type Specific (IgG)

An HSV IgG is blood test that shows if you have ever been infected with any type of herpes simplex. For best results, you may want to wait 12-16 weeks from the last possible contact with herpes before having a test. A positive test means that you have the herpes simplex virus; but it does not tell you when you became infected, which body site is infected or which type of herpes virus you have. Please note many people are infected with the herpes virus. If you have been infected before, this test will always be 'positive'.

2) Type Specific HSV 1 or HSV 2 (EIA)

A type specific herpes blood test is available in British Columbia through Life Labs which shows if you have been infected with herpes simplex virus (HSV) type 1 or type 2 or both. You will need a Life Labs Requisition with 'Herpes Type 1/2 Serology/Typing' written on it. The test is ordered by a physician and costs approximately \$130.00.

3) Type Specific HSV 1 or HSV 2 (Western Blot)

Another type of blood test, known as the Western Blot, shows if you have been infected with herpes simplex virus (HSV) type 1 or type 2 or both. This test has been superseded by the Type Specific HSV (EIA) test and is no longer available in British Columbia.

Contact the BC Centre for Disease Control, STI/HIV Clinic in Vancouver at 1-888-488-7444 or 604-707-5603 for further information or updates regarding herpes blood testing options.

Herpes is? (cont'd)

How do I care for myself during an outbreak?

DO



- Wear loose fitting clothes and cotton underwear.
- Have warm baths; add salt or baking soda to the water
- Apply ice packs to the sore skin for a short period of time
- Take Acetaminophen (Tylenol) or Ibuprofen (Advil)
- Eat well
- Get plenty of rest
- Reduce emotional or physical stress
- Decrease friction or rubbing of the sore skin
- Pour warm water over yourself when urinating (peeing)
- Urinate (pee) in a warm shower or bath
- Keep the skin area dry
- Use cool blow dryer to dry area after bathing

DON'T



- Sit for long periods
- Put anything on your skin until you have seen a health care provider
- Break open any blisters
- Have any sexual contact

What about medicine?

There is no cure for herpes, but there are medications available by prescription, called antivirals a) to help you with the symptoms, b) to reduce the number of outbreaks, or c) to reduce the potential spread to a partner. Talk to your health care provider about what is best for your health needs.

Primary Outbreak- Some people choose not to take treatment.

When it is your first outbreak your health care provider may suggest taking medication because it may lessen your symptoms and shorten the herpes outbreak. To work best, treatment must be started soon after your symptoms appear.

Episodic Therapy- Some people take treatment only when they have an outbreak. A person takes medication early in the herpes outbreak. The drugs may shorten the amount of time you have symptoms, decrease the symptoms, and may decrease shedding. This may reduce the risk of passing the virus to a sex partner.

Daily suppressive therapy –Some people take treatment everyday because they have frequent symptoms or they wish to decrease asymptomatic shedding.

Herpes is? (cont'd)

Genital herpes during pregnancy?

Recurrent Infection and your baby

If a woman has had genital herpes for more than 12 to 16 weeks, she will have made protective antibodies. If the woman becomes pregnant she passes these antibodies to the unborn baby. The risk of a baby getting herpes from a woman who has been infected before her pregnancy is low even when this woman has symptoms of genital herpes during the labor/birth. A woman with genital herpes may have a vaginal birth if there are no symptoms at the time of delivery. If you or your partner have a history of herpes talk to your health care provider before you conceive or early in your pregnancy about your herpes symptoms and your options for birth or treatment.

True Primary Infection and your baby

The greatest risk is when the woman's sexual partner has herpes but the woman has never had herpes before. The risk occurs when the woman is newly infected with genital herpes after about her sixth month of pregnancy and she then has a vaginal birth. The woman may not know she has become infected with herpes because she may not have any symptoms. Herpes in newborn babies is rare.

If a newborn baby becomes infected with herpes, it is called Neonatal Herpes, and it can cause serious health problems or death. Neonatal herpes can appear in a few days to a few weeks after birth. The baby may have a single sore or many sores on the skin; a rash; seem tired, not feed well, may vomit, or have breathing problems.

If you do not have herpes, try to avoid any type of sex (penis to vagina, penis to mouth, penis to rectum, and partner's mouth to your vagina, clitoris, labia, perineum, or rectum) with a partner who has herpes after the sixth month of your pregnancy.

Decreasing the risk of passing herpes to your baby/child

A baby or young child can get herpes from being kissed by a person who has herpes on the face. Any person with active herpes on the face is advised to not kiss or have mouth to skin contact with a baby or a child. The baby or child may not have made protective antibodies yet or have not received them from their mother so the baby or child is at risk.

How might I feel?

Once you have been told that you have genital herpes it is very common to feel a wide range of emotions. These emotions will be different for everyone and how you feel can depend on many things such as:

- How severe the physical symptoms have been
- How you have been told of the diagnosis
- Your beliefs or thoughts about genital herpes
- Whether you feel guilt, shame or remorse with getting a diagnosis of herpes
- How you think your partner may respond

Herpes is? (cont'd)

Anger

"I can't stop thinking about my diagnosis".

Depressed

"My life will never be the same again".

Guilt

"What if I gave it to someone?"

Shock

"How could this happen to me?"

Fear

"I'm scared to tell my partner".

Shame

"I can never have sex again"



What do I do next?

- Get the facts. Read reputable websites, books, re-read this handout, contact a STI clinic near you.
- You may wish to keep your diagnosis confidential or you may wish to tell: your doctor, the person you think gave you the infection so they can protect others and take care of themselves, and your future sex partners.
- Share your feelings/thoughts with someone you trust who will support you.
- Try other ways to show affection to your partner during an outbreak.
- Getting comfortable with knowing you have genital herpes takes time. Give yourself the time you need.
- Remember, you are a healthy person with a common, sometimes recurring, viral infection.

Talking to your partner (s)

You may ask did I get it from my partner. Did I give it to my partner?

Talking to your partner (s) can be one of the most challenging parts about living with herpes. None-the-less, it is important to find a way to talk to a partner about herpes BEFORE you have sex. Starting the talk takes courage. It may feel awkward. Telling a potential sex partner about your herpes diagnosis is a way of showing that you respect and trust this person.

When you want to tell a partner:

- Know the information well (symptoms, treatment, testing, and prevention).
- Pick a time that is non sexual and not rushed.
- Pick a place that is private, non sexual, neutral, and quiet.
- Prepare yourself; use all the resources you can find.
- Ask for help from a health care provider.
- Give your partner websites to view.
- Be calm and avoid negative words.
- Be realistic and remember your partner may have some of the same feelings you did and will need time to process the information you have given.

What you might say to a partner:

- I really like you and I want to get closer to you. We need to talk about our sexual past and safer sex.
- I trust you and I want to share something very personal.

Herpes is? (cont'd)

What about Genital herpes (Type 2) and HIV?

When a person has a sexually transmitted infection (STI) they are at more risk of giving or getting Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).

People with genital herpes Type 2, who are HIV negative, can get HIV more easily. The reason for this is that a HSV-2 infection changes the cells in the genital area so HIV can enter them more easily. This increased risk occurs even when there are no symptoms of herpes (asymptomatic shedding).

A person with HIV and HSV-2 can pass HIV to a partner more easily. Research shows that HSV-2 infections increase the amount of HIV virus in the genital area. Again, this risk is there even when there are no symptoms of herpes or during asymptomatic shedding. For persons with HSV-2 infections, the risk of getting or giving HIV is increased and ongoing. However recent research shows that having a genital HSV-1 infection does *not* increase the risk for getting or giving HIV when a person does not have open areas on the genital skin. Research into the link between HSV-2 and HIV is ongoing.

Talk to your health care provider about having a test for herpes if you:

- Have HIV but you do not know if you have herpes Type 2
- Have a sexual partner/contact with HIV and you do not know if you have HSV-2 and you are HIV negative.

Can herpes be a positive in your life?

- People say that herpes helped them to make positive choices in their life.
- Having herpes may also lead you to explore other rewarding, nonsexual relationships first, allowing you to build friendship and trust prior to engaging in a sexually intimate relationship.
- Sometimes concern over spreading herpes can lead people to get tested and use protection for other sexually transmitted infections. This can help you to adopt a new approach to your sexual health.
- The diagnosis of herpes may bring feelings that have been hidden to the surface. This may be painful but it can also give you a chance to learn more about yourself and grow as a person.



Herpes is? (cont'd)

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Herpes is? (cont'd)

Herpes Resources

Telephone Lines

- 1) **American Social Health Association (ASHA)** National STI Hotline : (919) 361-8488.
Trained specialists answer questions related to STIs - Genital Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV)
Lines open: M – F, 0900 – 1800 hrs. Eastern Standard Time.
- 2) **Sex Sense Line**
1- 800-739-7367 (1-800-sex-sens) or Lower Mainland (604) 731-7803.
Confidential information and referrals. Options for Sexual Health clinic locations.
M – F, 0900 – 2100 hrs. Pacific Standard Time.

Websites

- 1) STD Resource-BC Centre for Disease Control - <http://www.stdresource.com/disease/>
- 2) Seattle/King County Public Health -
<http://www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/communicable/std/GenitalHerpes.aspx>
- 3) National Institutes of Health-National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases -
<http://www.niaid.nih.gov/topics/genitalherpes/Pages/default.aspx>
- 4) American Social Health Association (ASHA) - Chat room available -
http://www.ashastd.org/herpes/herpes_overview.cfm
- 5) Facts of Life Line - <http://ab.wontgetweird.com/facts-of-life-line/>
- 6) Sex Sense – <http://bc.wontgetweird.com/index.cfm?PageID=4>

Books

- 1) Managing Herpes: Living & Loving with HSV by Charles Ebel & Wald, Anna (2007).
Can be purchased through the ASHA website: www.ashastd.org
- 2) The Truth about Herpes by Dr. Stephen Sacks (1997) 4th edition.

If you have any questions or need further information, please contact your doctor, your local health unit, or see contact information below.