

Genital Herpes

The Facts About Genital Herpes

What is the herpes simplex virus (HSV)?

Herpes simplex virus (HSV) is a virus that infects the skin and mucous membranes (mouth, genital areas, etc.) of humans. Most genital herpes infections are caused by herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2).

How many people have genital herpes?

Genital herpes is the most common sexually transmitted viral infection in the United States, with an estimated 45 million people infected.¹ This is over one in five Americans age 12 or over.² More than 45 percent of black Americans age 12 or over have been infected with HSV-2.³ In addition, one million people acquire genital herpes infection each year in the United States.⁴

How does someone get genital herpes?

HSV-2 is a sexually transmitted infection. Although HSV-2 typically causes genital infections, it can also cause oral infections that can then be spread by non-sexual activities like kissing. Similarly, although HSV-1 usually causes oral herpes infections, it can be transmitted to the genitals via oral sex, thereby becoming a sexually transmitted infection.

Unlike many other sexually transmitted infections that are spread by exposure to infected body fluids, HSV is commonly spread by skin-to-skin contact. When a person who has HSV present on his/her body comes in contact with someone who is not infected, the virus (and the infection) may spread. In addition to HSV infection in the oral and genital areas, HSV infection may also occur on the abdomen, thighs, hands and other areas.

The greatest risk factor for genital herpes infection is the total number of lifetime sexual partners a person has had. Women seem to be at greater risk for infection than do men.⁵

What are the symptoms?

The earliest symptoms of an initial genital herpes infection may include fever, headache and muscle aches that begin six to seven days after exposure. About eight days after exposure, lesions appear in the area of exposure. These lesions usually begin as small blisters, which break and become ulcers. The ulcers are painful and often burn or itch. Other genital symptoms include burning with urination, vaginal or urethral discharge and tender swollen lymph nodes in the groin area. Symptoms of the initial infection typically resolve within two to three weeks.⁶ Recurrent outbreaks of herpes skin lesions are common, but are usually not preceded by the fever, headache and muscle aches that generally precede the initial outbreak.

How does someone find out s(he) has genital herpes?

When someone visits a physician with symptoms of genital herpes (painful ulcers in the genital area), viral cultures or other tests to establish the presence of the virus can confirm the diagnosis.

Unfortunately, as many as 90 percent of people with genital herpes do not know they are infected.⁷ Tests for detecting herpes infection in patients without symptoms are available, but not widely used. In

individuals (or groups of individuals) known to be at high risk of infection, it may be appropriate to test people who don't have symptoms of genital herpes to reduce the chance of unknowingly infecting a sexual partner.

How is genital herpes treated?

There is no cure for genital herpes. Treatment with anti-viral medications like Acyclovir reduces the duration and intensity of symptoms. Long-term treatment with these medications can decrease the frequency of recurrences and asymptomatic viral shedding.⁸

What are some of the long-term effects of genital herpes?

Once a person is infected with HSV-2 (s)he is probably infected for life and can transmit the infection to others even at times when (s)he is not experiencing symptoms. Approximately 90 percent of individuals with an initial symptomatic HSV-2 infection will experience at least one recurrence of symptoms within the 12 months following the initial episode, and 38 percent have at least six recurrences in the first year.⁹ Recurrence rates decrease over time, but recurrences can occur for the remainder of the person's life.¹⁰

An additional consequence of genital herpes infection is that infected individuals are at increased risk of contracting HIV, the virus that leads to AIDS.¹¹ They may also be more likely to spread HIV to others.¹²

Finally, mothers with genital herpes can transmit the infection to their newborn infants. This risk is greatest with primary (first-time) infections. With recurrent infections, the risk is less than 1 percent.¹³ Infected newborns are quite sick and often die. Genital herpes infection of the mother also increases the risk of both spontaneous abortion and premature birth.¹⁴

How can I avoid getting genital herpes?

Based on the limited studies, it appears condoms only reduce the risk of acquiring genital herpes through sexual activity by half at best if they are used consistently and correctly. However, since the virus is transmitted by skin-to-skin contact, condoms are likely to be less effective in reducing the transmission of herpes than they are for infections transmitted by body fluids.¹⁶ Condoms do not cover all the skin in the genital area, and sex with an infected person can result in an infection, even when condoms are used.

If you have already been sexually active outside a lifelong mutually faithful relationship (as in marriage), talk to your healthcare provider about getting you and your partner tested for STDs. Abstinence from sexual activity—including oral sex—or lifetime faithfulness to one uninfected partner is the only certain way to avoid being infected sexually.

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