



# UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND UNIVERSITY HEALTH CENTER

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## Genital Herpes

Herpes (also called herpes simplex virus) is a virus infection which can cause painful sores. There are two common types of herpes virus: Type I usually causes fever blisters or cold sores around the mouth; Type II usually causes genital lesions and is spread by sexual contact. However, each type can be transmitted to the mouth and genital areas in men and women.

### Symptoms

Genital herpes generally begins about 2 - 20 days after exposure, with itching or irritation in the area. Small blisters develop and then form painful sores. These can last from one to six weeks but they often dry in five to seven days and heal without scarring in about two weeks. Occasionally, there are flu-like symptoms of aching, fever, and tender lymph glands in the groin. Marked burning when urinating may be experienced because it hurts to urinate over the raw lesions.

### Diagnosis

Genital herpes can be diagnosed by the symptoms and appearance of the lesions. Other tests may be done to confirm the diagnosis. These tests may include taking a cytological smear from the lesions, taking a smear from the lesion for a fluorescent antibody test; culturing the virus from a lesion, detection of antibodies from the blood and PCR testing of a smear taken from a lesion. Some blood tests and PCR testing can distinguish the type I from the type II strain. At the Health Center, a PCR test is generally performed to confirm the diagnosis of herpes.

### Treatment

There is no known cure for herpes yet, only treatment of the symptoms. Treatment with antiviral medications like Zovirax, Valtrex, and Famvir can bring great relief from an outbreak. These drugs inhibit viral replication and can reduce the pain and hasten the healing of lesions. Other symptomatic treatments have been tried, such as the application of an anesthetic spray. Most authorities advise against the use of creams or ointments (except Zovirax) because they may spread and prolong the presence of lesions. Antibiotics are ineffective against viruses, and are used only on the rare occurrence of a secondary infection. In severe cases, aspirin, acetaminophen, Advil (ibuprofen) or even prescription drugs are needed for pain.

One easily available "home remedy" is the application of wet tea bags on the lesions. Tannic acid dries the lesions and is not painful to apply.

### Good hygiene is extremely important!

- Wash your hands after touching infected areas to avoid spreading the virus to other parts of your body, or to someone else.
- Keep the genital area clean and dry. Symptoms may be relieved by taking frequent baths, and by using a hair dryer or a desk lamp with an incandescent bulb to help dry the lesions. A washcloth soaked with Burroughs solution (a non-prescription drug) may also be applied to the lesions for relief of symptoms.
- Avoid restrictive clothing, i.e., tight jeans and tight underwear. Wear cotton underpants. Women can urinate while sitting in a tub of water

or while pouring water over the genital area to dilute the urine and prevent burning of the ulcerated areas. If you drink more fluids you will also dilute the urine and help prevent urinary complications.

### Prognosis and Recurrences

Since the herpes virus is not eliminated from the body but "hides out" in a dormant state in nerve tissue, it tends to recur. It is impossible to predict who is going to have a recurrence or when this will happen, if at all. One study found about 50% of the people infected have recurrences, usually within six months, but some recurrences can occur many years later. Recurrences are generally not so severe or long-lasting and usually become less and less frequent with time.

Recurrences seem to be triggered by various forms of stress, both emotional and physical, such as final exams, menstruation, poor eating habits, sleep deprivation, loss of a friend, etc. Recurrences can be treated by starting an antiviral medication at the first sign of an outbreak. The sooner the medication is started, the better it works to stop the outbreak and promote healing. Men and women who experience severe and frequent recurrences of genital herpes may find it helpful to explore lifestyle changes and stress reduction techniques. Both counseling and group support are available through the University Health Center.

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## **Prevention**

Herpes is highly contagious when sores are present! It can be spread without the presence of active lesions, and so transmission of the virus can occur between outbreaks. New studies indicate the use of Valtrex on a daily basis for suppression of viral shedding can lengthen the time to transmission of the virus to an uninfected partner.

All sexual contact should be avoided from the first sign of a recurrence until 4-5 days after all of the sores are healed. Condoms may reduce the risk of transmission and should be used for all sexual contact. Spermicides used with the condom add to the protection and prevention. However, the protection provided by condoms is limited if it does not cover the area of skin infected by the virus.

**Remember that genital herpes (Type II) can be transmitted to the mouth and oral herpes (Type I) can be transmitted to the genitals. Avoid kissing anyone with a cold sore. Avoid oral-genital contact. Wash your hands after touching any sores on the mouth or genitals on yourself or someone else!**

## **Other Important Considerations**

In pregnancy, herpes can occasionally cause a problem, especially if it is a first attack. If the woman has an active genital herpes lesion while in labor, a caesarean section delivery may be done to prevent the baby from becoming infected while passing through the birth canal. Because obstetricians are now monitoring women during pregnancy very carefully, very few infants experience problems these days.

There is no cure or preventative vaccine for herpes yet, but extensive research is being done in this area. Also many new drugs are being tested and lab tests are being developed to fight herpes.

People with herpes can obtain information and support through the National Herpes Hot Line (919) 361-8488, and the American Social Health Association ([www.ashstd.org](http://www.ashstd.org))