

Herpes

What is it?
How is it transmitted?
How is it treated?

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What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). It is a very common virus.

How is genital herpes transmitted?

Genital herpes spreads from person to person through skin-to-skin contact, such as during vaginal, anal or oral sex. You can catch genital herpes if you have oral sex with someone who has a cold sore - a blister around the mouth that is also caused by HSV.

What are the signs and symptoms of genital herpes?

Most people with the herpes simplex virus (HSV) don't experience any symptoms when first infected and symptoms may not appear for months or sometimes years after being exposed to the virus. Symptoms may appear shortly after being exposed to the virus (2-14 days).

Symptoms of first-time genital herpes (primary infection) can last for up to 3 weeks and may include:

- small blisters that burst to leave red, open sores around your genitals, rectum, thighs and buttocks
- blisters and ulcers on the cervix (lower part of the womb) in women
- vaginal discharge in women
- pain when you pass urine
- a general feeling of being unwell, with aches, pains and flu-like symptoms

The sores will eventually scab over and heal up.

Recurrent infections (secondary infection)

Although the symptoms of genital herpes will go, the virus stays inactive in a nearby nerve. It may be reactivated occasionally, travelling back down the nerve to the skin and causing recurrent outbreaks.

Symptoms of a recurrent outbreak may include a tingling, burning or itching sensation around your genitals, and sometimes down your leg, before blisters appear.

Recurrent outbreaks are usually shorter and less severe. This is because your body has produced protective antibodies in reaction to the previous infection. Over time, you should find any recurrent genital herpes infections become less frequent and less severe.

What is the test for genital herpes?

A swab is used to collect a sample of fluid from a blister, which is sent to the lab to be tested. Results usually come back within 2 weeks. The test only takes a few seconds and may sting for a moment if the blisters and sores are tender.

What is the treatment for genital herpes?

The most common treatment for a first outbreak of genital herpes (primary infection) is aciclovir - antiviral tablets which you will need to take three times a day for five days (or longer if new blisters are still forming). Aciclovir does not clear the virus from your body completely and you may get shorter and less painful outbreaks in the future.

Aciclovir can cause some side effects, including being sick and headaches, although this is very rare.

Aciclovir is cheap and safe and your GP can prescribe it. If you feel an outbreak starting you can take 800mg of aciclovir 3 times a day for one or two days - ask your GP or come and talk to Sexual Health Sheffield. Some people take aciclovir every day for a few months. Show your GP this leaflet if you need to.

What happens if genital herpes is not treated?

It is not essential to have treatment as genital herpes will clear up by itself. However, prompt treatment at the start of an outbreak can be a great help – it can reduce the time the outbreak lasts, help the healing process and can reduce the risk of you passing the virus on to someone else.

For most people, herpes is not a serious problem. However, it can be serious for newborn babies, pregnant women, and those with immune disorders.

Pregnancy and childbirth

If you are pregnant, it is important to inform your midwife about your herpes infection so that you receive the most appropriate care in this pregnancy and subsequent pregnancies.

If you had genital herpes before becoming pregnant, the risk to your baby is very low. Even if you have recurrent episodes of genital herpes throughout your pregnancy, your baby should not be at increased risk. However, you may need to take an antiviral medication, such as aciclovir, continuously from week 36 of the pregnancy until the birth to reduce the chance of a recurrence at the time of delivery.

If you develop genital herpes for the first time during the first 26 weeks of pregnancy, you may be at risk of having a miscarriage.

If you develop genital herpes for the first time after week 27 of the pregnancy, the risk of passing the virus on to your baby is higher, and you will be advised to take antiviral medicine continuously for the last four weeks of your pregnancy. A caesarean section may be advised.

If you have genital herpes blisters or ulcers at the time of the birth, the chance of passing the infection on to your baby rises, and you may be advised to have a Caesarean section.

What is asymptomatic shedding?

This is when the virus is detectable on the skin but nothing can be seen, and the person is still infectious. Asymptomatic shedding is most likely to happen in the first year of the infection and to reduce after this.

Herpes and stigma

'Stigma' means a strong feeling of disapproval that many people have about something.

Lots of people are upset when they get a diagnosis of genital herpes, because it still carries a stigma - but there is no need to be upset; HSV is a very common infection and very rarely has complications. You may have worries that having herpes will make future relationships and sex difficult, but this does not have to be the case. Genital herpes is a skin condition that affects genital skin - if untreated it does not lead to problems like those associated with some other STIs.

Is there anything I can do to help myself?

During an outbreak, the following can help:

- Keep the affected area clean using either plain or salt water to prevent blisters or ulcers becoming infected and to help it to heal quicker
- Apply an ice pack wrapped in a flannel, or cold, wet, tea bags on the sores to help soothe pain and speed up the healing process. Do not apply ice directly to the skin
- Put petroleum jelly, or an anaesthetic cream on the blisters to reduce pain when you pass urine
- Drink plenty of fluids to dilute your urine to make urinating less painful
- If passing urine is painful, pour salted water over the area as you wee
- Avoid wearing tight clothing as it may irritate the blisters and ulcers
- Use a mild pain relieving drug if needed
- Avoid using scented soaps and perfumed products
- After washing, dry the area gently or use a hair dryer. Use your own towel
- Wash your hands before and after touching the genital area

Can I still have sex?

If you have sex before your blisters and ulcers have cleared up, you are likely to pass on genital herpes. Using condoms will help, unless the blisters and ulcers are outside the area covered by the condom.

What about telling my partner(s)?

Treatment with aciclovir can reduce the risk of passing HSV on to your partner but cannot prevent it altogether. Sexual Health Sheffield can help with telling partners (partner notification) and your confidentiality is protected.

How can I protect myself from genital herpes and other sexually transmitted infections?

The blisters and sores are highly infectious, so if you or a partner has cold sores or genital herpes:

- Avoid kissing when you or a partner have cold sores around the mouth
- Avoid oral sex when you or a partner have mouth or genital sores
- Avoid any genital or anal contact when you or a partner has genital sores or blisters, or if you feel an outbreak starting. It is possible to get genital herpes and other sexually transmitted infections by having sex with someone who has the infection but has no symptoms

The following measures can help to protect you from genital herpes and most other sexually transmitted infections, such as genital warts, chlamydia and gonorrhoea. If you have a sexually transmitted infection they will also help prevent you from passing it on to your partner(s):

- Use condoms every time you have vaginal or anal sex
- If you have oral sex, use a condom to cover the penis
- Any genital to genital contact between partners could pass on STIs. Using dams or condoms before sexual contact can help prevent infection
- If you are not sure how to use condoms correctly visit **www.sexualhealthsheffield.nhs.uk**

- Avoid sharing sex toys. If you do share them, wash or sterilise them or cover them with a new condom before anyone else uses them
- Arrange regular HIV/STI check-ups, especially at change/start of relationships with new sexual partners

What happens at Sexual Health Sheffield?

When you attend for your appointment, you will be asked to provide the following:

- Your name and how we can contact you - any details you provide will be treated confidentially
- During your visit you will be asked personal information so we can provide the relevant and appropriate care
- We have a duty of care to all our patients, so if you are 17 or under you will be asked relevant questions to assess your safety. If staff are concerned, they may talk to you about what to do about this and may contact other appropriate agencies. Sexual Health Sheffield will not tell your parents or carers that you have visited Sexual Health Sheffield

This is the service you can expect when you attend Sexual Health Sheffield:

- All advice, information, tests, contraception, condoms and treatments are free at Sexual Health Sheffield
- No one should judge you because of your sexual behaviour or lifestyle
- All our services are confidential
- All Sexual Health Sheffield workers are appropriately and fully trained NHS staff
- Please ask questions to ensure you fully understand what services have been offered, what tests carried out and what treatments/contraception given

- You can have a chaperone to help you feel more comfortable – please ask
- Our friendly and professional staff are here to help you. We will give you as much support as you need (particularly if you need help on how to inform any partners)

If you feel that we have not met the above or want to give us any other feedback, please contact us via:

www.sth.nhs.uk/patients/tell-us-what-you-think

Further information

Herpes Virus Association

- www.hva.org.uk
- Advice telephone line 0845 123 2305

www.sexualhealthsheffield.nhs.uk

- 0114 226 8888

NHS Choices website

- www.nhs.uk/conditions/Sexually-transmitted-infections/Pages/Introduction.aspx



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