

Herpes

"Herpes" is a term used to refer to a sexually transmitted infection, STI (also known as a sexually transmitted disease (STD)) caused by two different but closely related viruses: Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV) - Type 1 and Type 2.

HSV Type 1 is the usual cause of oral infections, which produce skin lesions on the lips, commonly called "cold sores" or "fever blisters." HSV Type 2 is usually associated with infection of the genitals. While HSV Type 1 most commonly infects the oral tissue and HSV Type 2 the genital tissue, both can cause infection anywhere on the body.

PREVALENCE

Nationwide, 45 million people over the age of 12, which is one out of five adolescents and adults, have had genital herpes infection. Genital HSV-2 infection is more common in women (approximately one out of four women) than in men (almost one out of five). This may be due to male-to-female transmissions being more likely than female-to-male transmission.

TRANSMISSION

A person with an active herpes infection, i.e., with blisters, is highly infectious due to large numbers of viral particles shed from the blisters. Herpes may be spread to other places on a person's own body, most often to the fingers or, via the hands, to the eyes, nose, mouth, or genitals. It can also be passed to others in close physical contact, such as by kissing, sexual activity, or other intimate contact.

In research studies, herpes virus has been cultured from oral and genital skin of infected individuals even when no blisters were present. It is believed that virus particles are contagious even when there are no blisters, but that the chance of spreading is much less than when there are active blisters.

SYMPTOMS

Typically, a person exposed to the herpes virus who has never had herpes before will begin to notice symptoms in 2 to 21 days. With oral herpes, there may be red, itchy, or painful sores or blisters on the lips, in the mouth, and in the throat.

For genital herpes, the sores are on the penis and scrotum in men; on the vulva, vagina, and cervix in women; and may be in the pubic area or on the legs in men and women. The sores of genital herpes may produce pain in the legs, buttocks, or genital area, and urination may be painful.

Cases of both oral and genital herpes may be accompanied by fever, headache, muscle ache, and swollen glands. These symptoms usually resolve in one to three weeks. The virus is brought under control by the body's immune system but usually remains in the body, dormant in the roots of local nerves. Some individuals may acquire herpes infection but have no signs or symptoms for months or years. In women, if the sores are only in the vagina or on the cervix, symptoms may not be evident.

RECURRENT EPISODES

After the initial infection with herpes, it is possible for a person to have a recurrence. Recurrences occur when immune system functioning is lowered, such as at times of stress, fatigue or other illnesses, allowing the virus to be released along the nerve in which it has been dormant and to come to the skin surface. The symptoms are usually milder than those of the initial

infection, are limited to one or a few blisters with a tingling or burning sensation, and last about a week.

DIAGNOSIS

A fairly simple test to diagnose the infection is available for people with skin blisters suggestive of herpes. This test is done by touching a cotton swab to the affected skin, placing the swab in a culture solution, and sending it to a laboratory for processing. Test results are available within two weeks. In addition, blood tests are available which may help to determine whether there has been any exposure to herpes in the past.

TREATMENT

Since there is no cure for herpes, prevention is most desirable. Although herpes is not a devastating illness, infections of the genitals may cause problems of pain and embarrassment. There are several prescription anti-viral medications on the market that can shorten the duration and lessen the severity of symptoms and reduce viral shedding. Anti-viral medications, however, do not provide a cure for herpes. These medications are usually reserved for cases of genital herpes but are occasionally used to treat severe cases of oral herpes.

Older remedies that have been around for years aim mainly to reduce discomfort. For oral herpes, lip balms such as Blistex and drying agents such as tincture of benzoin are commonly used. For genital herpes, warm compresses or warm baths can be soothing. If urination is painful because of external blisters, urinating in water can reduce the discomfort. Wearing loose underwear will reduce external pressure on sensitive skin.

PREVENTION

Direct contact with an active herpes blister should be avoided. Kissing should be avoided if either person has an active oral herpes sore. Genital contact should be avoided if there is an active genital sore. Oral-genital contact should be avoided for either oral or genital sores. The herpes virus can be spread by close, intimate contact, even if intercourse does not occur.

Condoms may reduce the likelihood of spreading herpes if the sores are vaginal or cervical in women or penile in men. They will not, however, protect from sores not covered by the condom. The female condom and the dental dam also offer some protection.

PREVENTING RECURRENT EPISODES

What triggers a dormant herpes infection to become reactivated is not understood, but recurrences seem most often to happen when immune system functioning is lowered, such as stress, fatigue, illness, or premenstrual times for women. Excessive sun exposure, constipation, and consumption of nuts may precipitate recurrences in some people.

There is a large degree of variability among people in the number and severity of recurrences. Some people may never have any reactivation after the initial infection, while others may have recurrences several times a year.

Habits such as a good diet, adequate sleep, regular exercise, and control of stress are helpful in minimizing recurrences. Avoidance of known triggers, such as excessive sun or certain foods, also will reduce recurrences. Individuals who have frequent or severe recurrent episodes should talk to a health care professional about suppressive therapy.

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OTHER CONCERNS

Cervical Cancer:

In women, genital herpes has been associated with an increased risk of cervical cancer. While herpes is not the causative agent, there is a fairly high rate of concurrent infection with another virus, called the human papilloma virus (HPV) or genital wart virus, which is causally linked to cervical cancer. Yearly Pap smears, which detect early cell changes that precede cervical cancer, are especially important for women who know they have either genital herpes or genital warts. Yearly Pap smears are recommended for most women. Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable of all cancers, due to early detection methods and effective treatments at early stages.

Pregnancy Implications: Women with genital herpes can have normal, healthy children, just as others can. What is important to know is that if herpes is causing active genital sores at the time of delivery, a cesarean delivery will probably be necessary. This is to prevent exposure of the infant to the virus in the vaginal canal. Such exposure can potentially cause severe illness in a newborn infant. A woman who has had genital herpes should tell her obstetrician so the appropriate precautions can be taken.

Herpes Stress Reaction: Although herpes infections are not life threatening, people can become quite anxious when they contract the disease. Do not be afraid to learn about herpes. The future looks promising for more effective treatments. Useful information can help everyone cope better with a herpes infection.

RESOURCES

University of Rochester:

- University Health Service: 275-2662
- University Counseling Center: 275-3113

Rochester, NY:

- Planned Parenthood: 546-2775

National:

- National STI Hotline: (800) 227-8922
- National Herpes Hotline: (919) 361-8488

SCHEDULING AN APPOINTMENT

The University Health Service (UHS) offers a full range of health care services for men and women. You can schedule an appointment with your primary care provider (PCP) by calling 275-2662. Women can also schedule an appointment with one of the women's health nurse practitioners. All visits to UHS are confidential.

LINKS

For more information about herpes, you can visit:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:
<http://www.cdc.gov/std/Herpes/STDFact-Herpes.htm>

Planned Parenthood:
<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/sti/herpes.htm>

American Social Health Association (ASHA)
<http://www.ashastd.org/hrc/>

Herpes Resource Center Hotline
www.herpesresourcecenter.com