

Genital herpes

Looking after **your** sexual health

Genital herpes

Genital herpes is a common sexually transmitted infection (STI). It is caused by a virus called Herpes simplex. Most people who get genital herpes get it quite mildly but some will have painful symptoms. Medication, education and self-help treatment help to reduce symptoms and limit the number of herpes outbreaks.

This booklet gives you information about genital herpes, what you can do if you are worried that you might have the infection and advice on how to protect yourself.

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What causes genital herpes?

Genital herpes is caused by the virus Herpes simplex (HSV). There are two types, HSV-1 and HSV-2. Both types can infect the genital and anal area (genital herpes) and also the mouth and nose (cold sores) and fingers and hand (whitlows).

The virus enters the body through small cracks in the skin or through the moist soft lining (mucous membranes) of the mouth, vagina, rectum, urethra (tube where urine comes out) and under the foreskin. Following an infection by the Herpes simplex virus some people will experience an outbreak of genital herpes (see page 5). The virus then becomes dormant (inactive) and remains in the body where you were infected. In some people the virus can become active again from time to time and cause

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further outbreaks of genital herpes – known as recurrent outbreaks (see page 6).

How is genital herpes passed on?

Genital herpes can be passed from one person to another during sexual contact. Anyone who is sexually active can get the virus. Both men and women can have genital herpes, and pass it on.

The Herpes simplex virus is most likely to be passed on just before, during or straight after an outbreak.

Genital herpes can be passed on:

- From one person to another during vaginal or anal sex, or by sharing sex toys.
- By skin to skin contact during sex. It can be passed on by close genital contact – you don't need to have penetrative sex (vaginal or anal) to pass it on.
- By skin to skin contact during sex if the virus is active on the skin outside the area protected by a condom or a latex or a polyurethane square.
- If you receive oral sex from someone who has a cold sore or is just about to get one.
- If a person with herpes on the hand or finger touches a partner's vagina, genitals or anal area.

It is possible for a pregnant woman to pass the virus to her baby if she is having an outbreak at the time of giving birth (see page 13).

If you already have one type of Herpes simplex virus it is still possible for you to get the other type although you may not notice symptoms.

You cannot get genital herpes from hugging, sharing baths or towels, from swimming pools, toilet seats or from sharing cups, plates or cutlery.

Can I pass the virus to a partner when I have no signs or symptoms?

In some people the body can shed the virus from the skin or mucous membranes without there being any signs or symptoms of genital herpes. This is called asymptomatic shedding or viral shedding. It is possible to pass the virus on during periods of asymptomatic shedding but for most people the risk is low. Shedding is higher in the first year after infection and if you have frequent outbreaks. The longer the time between outbreaks the less likely you are to have any asymptomatic shedding.

What are the signs and symptoms of the first outbreak of genital herpes?

Many people will not have any visible signs or symptoms at all, or not be aware of them.

Some people will get symptoms within 4–5 days of coming into contact with the virus. In other people the virus may be in the body for several weeks, months or possibly years before any signs or symptoms appear. Therefore, when you get symptoms it doesn't necessarily mean you've only just come into contact with the virus.

If you do get signs or symptoms, they usually follow a pattern. You may have some or all of the following:

- Feeling generally unwell with flu-like symptoms such as fever, tiredness, headache, swollen glands, aches and pains in the lower back and down the legs or in the groin. This will be followed by:
- Stinging, tingling or itching in the genital or anal area.
- Small, fluid-filled blisters anywhere in the genital or anal area, on the buttocks and the tops of the thighs. These burst within a day or two leaving small, red sores which can be very

painful.

- Pain when passing urine (peeing) caused by the urine flowing over the sores.

What are the signs and symptoms of recurrent genital herpes?

Signs and symptoms of recurrent outbreaks are usually milder than with the first outbreak and clear up more quickly (in about a week).

There is often an early warning tingling sensation and you may get a flu-like illness before an outbreak. The blisters and sores are usually fewer, smaller, and less painful and heal more quickly. They normally appear in the same part of the body as in previous outbreaks but in some people they may appear nearby.

How will I know if I have the virus?

You can only be certain you have genital herpes if you have a check-up when you've got signs or symptoms. You could have genital herpes even if your partner(s) has never had an outbreak.

It is possible to have more than one sexually transmitted infection at the same time. You may wish to have a check-up for infection if:

- you, or a partner have, or think you might have, symptoms
- you have recently had unprotected sex with a new partner
- you, or a partner, have had unprotected sex with other partners
- a sexual partner tells you they have a sexually transmitted infection
- you have another sexually transmitted infection
- you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy.

Having genital herpes might mean you are more

at risk of becoming infected with HIV if you're having sex with an HIV positive partner or of passing it on if you are HIV positive.

How soon after sex can I have a check-up?

You can have a check-up as soon as you have signs or symptoms. There is no routine test for genital herpes if you do not have signs or symptoms.

What does the check-up involve?

In many cases, a doctor or nurse may diagnose genital herpes by looking at the affected skin. They will want to confirm this by taking a swab of fluid from the infected area, if they can. The swab will then be sent to the laboratory and the result will usually be known within 1–2 weeks.

A swab looks a bit like a cotton bud, but is smaller and rounded. It is wiped over the parts of the body that could be infected and easily picks up samples of fluid. This only takes a few seconds and may sting for a moment if the blisters and sores are tender.

There is a specific blood test that can be done to look for antibodies to the virus. This is not used as a routine test for genital herpes.

Cervical screening tests and routine blood tests do **not** detect the Herpes simplex virus.

How accurate are the tests?

No tests are 100 per cent accurate. It is easier to diagnose genital herpes at the beginning of an outbreak when it is possible to take a sample of fluid from a blister or sore before it starts to heal. An accurate diagnosis will depend on the amount of virus that is being shed at the time, the stage of the blisters or sores and the type of test that is used on the swab specimen. The doctor or nurse

will talk to you about how accurate your test result might be.

Where can I get a check-up?

There are a number of services you can go to. Choose the service you feel most comfortable with.

A genital herpes check-up can be done at:

- a genitourinary medicine (GUM) or sexual health clinic
- your general practice (ask a doctor or practice nurse)
- some contraception clinics and young people's services.

Will I have to pay for tests and treatment?

All tests are free through NHS services. Treatment is also free unless you go to your general practice when you may have to pay a prescription charge for the treatment.

What is the treatment for genital herpes?

The aim of the treatment is to relieve the pain, and to prevent the virus from multiplying.

- Treatment is recommended when you have the first outbreak as this may provide some relief.
- Treatment is usually started within five days of the start of the first outbreak and while new blisters or sores are still forming. It involves taking antiviral tablets daily (sometimes up to five times a day) for five days. There are several different antiviral tablets that can be used.
- Some people find it helpful to take antiviral treatment when they get another outbreak of genital herpes. You may be given some tablets

to take at home. These need to be started as soon as the outbreak begins.

- People who have repeated outbreaks (usually more than six in a year) may be given longer courses of the tablets to try to reduce the number of outbreaks. This is known as suppressive therapy. Suppressive therapy can stop outbreaks completely.
- If you are pregnant, or trying to become pregnant, tell the doctor or nurse so they can talk to you about pregnancy and Herpes simplex. If you have an outbreak of herpes in pregnancy it is still possible to have treatment (see page 13).
- As genital herpes is caused by a virus and not bacteria, antibiotics will not help.
- The treatment you can buy for facial cold sores is not suitable for genital herpes.

Is there anything I can do myself to ease the discomfort?

There are several things you can do to ease the discomfort and speed up the healing process:

- Apply an ice pack. Put ice cubes in a plastic bag and then wrap them in a clean towel or flannel. Put them on the sores for up to an hour or so. Ice should not be put directly onto the skin.
- Put cold, wet tea bags on the sores. They are soothing and speed up healing.
- Take a cool shower to soothe the sores.
- Apply a local anaesthetic ointment such as lidocaine. This will help relieve the pain. You can buy this from the pharmacy.
- Avoid washing too often, and dab the affected area gently to dry it.
- Gently bathe the area using cottonwool and a warm salt water solution (1 tsp to 1 pt water).

- If urinating is painful, go to the toilet in a warm bath or shower.
- Wash your hands before touching the blisters or sores. This helps to avoid introducing bacteria which may cause an infection and delay the healing process.
- Drink extra fluids, such as water or soft drinks.
- Wear loose clothing.
- Use a mild pain relieving drug, if you need to.

When will the signs and symptoms go away?

Outbreaks will last a different length of time in each person and will depend on your general state of health and whether this is the first or a recurrent outbreak of genital herpes. The first outbreak of herpes may last from 2–4 weeks in total.

- The flu-like symptoms usually last for about a week.
- Individual sores take around 5–10 days to heal. Once the sores start healing they are less painful.
- Pain and irritation can last up to two weeks or longer.

The signs and symptoms of a recurrent outbreak of genital herpes will usually last for a shorter time than the first outbreak.

How can I prevent further outbreaks?

Some people find different triggers bring on an outbreak. If you notice a pattern, you may be able to do something about it by changing certain aspects of your life. Common triggers can include:

- being ill, run down, tired or stressed

- different times in the menstrual cycle
- friction from sex or masturbation
- ultraviolet light on the affected skin area (such as from sunbathing or using sun beds)
- tight clothing and nylon or lycra underwear
- drinking alcohol or smoking.

Recurrences eventually stop altogether within 18–24 months for many people, although it may take much longer for others.

Do I need a follow-up appointment?

Not necessarily. If the doctor or nurse would like to test for other sexually transmitted infections you may be asked to go back when the outbreak is over. This will be a good time to ask the doctor or nurse any other questions you may have.

What happens if genital herpes isn't 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.

How soon can I have sex again?

It is strongly advised that you do not have any sexual intercourse, including vaginal, anal or oral sex, if you know an outbreak is coming, while you have signs and symptoms, and for a week after the symptoms have gone.

This is to help prevent you passing the infection on to someone else. Having sex while you have blisters or sores can also delay the healing process.

Will I know how long I've had the virus?

If you have had more than one sexual partner it can be difficult to know which partner you got genital herpes from. The genital herpes check-up cannot tell you how long the infection has been there. If you feel upset or angry about having genital herpes and find it difficult to talk to your partner(s) or friends, don't be afraid to discuss how you feel with the staff at the clinic or general practice or with a support group.

Should I tell my partner(s)?

If the check-up shows that you have genital herpes then it is not usually recommended that a partner has a check-up unless they have signs or symptoms. The doctor or nurse will talk to you about whether or not it may be helpful to tell your sexual partner(s) and how to do this. The Herpes Viruses Association has helpful advice on how you might talk to a sexual partner about herpes. Visit www.herpes.org.uk.

Does genital herpes affect my fertility?

No. Genital herpes does not affect fertility in men or women.

What happens if I have genital herpes when I'm pregnant?

Most women who have genital herpes give birth to healthy babies. Genital herpes can be safely treated during pregnancy.

If you get genital herpes before you get pregnant the risk of passing it on to your baby at birth is very low and you do not usually need to have a caesarean delivery.

If you get genital herpes for the first time after you have become pregnant this may be more serious.

- If the first outbreak of genital herpes occurs in the first three months of pregnancy, there is a small risk of miscarriage.
- If you get genital herpes for the first time late in your pregnancy you will not have time to pass on your immunity to your baby and the virus can be passed to the baby during vaginal delivery. In these cases a caesarean birth is often recommended.

Repeat outbreaks of genital herpes during pregnancy pose little risk to the baby at birth but you may be given some treatment to prevent an outbreak occurring when you are due to give birth.

You can get more information on genital herpes in pregnancy from www.rcog.org.uk.

Does genital herpes cause cervical cancer?

No. There is no evidence that genital herpes causes cervical cancer.

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

The blisters and sores are highly infectious, so if you or a partner have 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, have 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 will help protect you from genital herpes and most other sexually transmitted infections including HIV, chlamydia and gonorrhoea. If you have a sexually transmitted infection they will also help prevent you from passing it on to a partner:

- Use condoms (male or female) every time you have vaginal or anal sex.
- If you have oral sex, use a condom to cover the penis, or a latex or polyurethane (soft plastic) square to cover the female genitals or male or female anus.
- If you are a woman and rub your vulva against a female partner's vulva one of you should cover the genitals with a latex or polyurethane square.
- If you are not sure how to use condoms correctly visit www.fpa.org.uk for more information.
- Avoid sharing sex toys. If you do share them, wash them or cover them with a new condom before anyone else uses them.

Using a service

- Wherever you go, you shouldn't be judged because of your sexual behaviour.
- All advice, information and tests are free.
- All services are confidential.
- All tests are optional and should only be done with your permission.
- Ask as many questions as you need to – and make sure you get answers you understand.
- The staff will offer you as much support as you need, particularly if you need help on how to tell a partner.

Where can I get more information and advice?

The Sexual Health Information Line provides confidential advice and information on all aspects of sexual health. The number is 0300 123 7123 and the service is available from Monday to Friday from 9am - 8pm and at weekends from 11am - 4pm.

For additional information on sexual health visit www.fpa.org.uk

Information for young people can be found at www.brook.org.uk

Clinics

To locate your closest clinic you can:

- Use Find a Clinic at www.fpa.org.uk/clinics
- Download FPA's Find a Clinic app for iPhone or Android.

You can find details of general practices and pharmacies in England at www.nhs.uk and in Wales at www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk. In Scotland you can find details of general practices at www.nhs.24.com and in Northern Ireland at www.hscni.net

A final word

This booklet can only give you general information. The information is based on evidence-based guidance produced by The British Association of Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH).



talking sense about sex



www.fpa.org.uk

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If you would like the information on the evidence used to produce this booklet or would like to provide us with feedback about this booklet email feedback@fpa.org.uk

