

# Herpes: Causes, Symptoms, and Treatments

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Knowledge center

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**Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted infection caused by HSV (herpes simplex virus). This virus affects the genitals, the cervix, and skin in other parts of the body.**

Herpes is a chronic (long-term) condition. However, many people never have symptoms even though they are carrying the virus.

Many people with HSV have recurring genital herpes. When a person is first infected, the recurrences, if they do occur, tend to happen more frequently.

Over time, the remission periods get longer and longer. Each occurrence tends to become less severe with time.

There are two types of herpes simplex viruses: HSV-1 (Herpes Type 1) and HSV-2 (Herpes Type 2).

Cases of genital herpes are typically caused by HSV-2, which is primarily transmitted through sexual contact. HSV-1, which most commonly causes oral herpes, can cause genital herpes through oral-genital contact.<sup>1</sup>

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#### Fast facts about herpes

- People who have genital herpes can have sex, but they should avoid sexual contact if they have symptoms. Wearing a condom helps prevent passing it on.
- [More than 50 percent of the population](#) of the United States have HSV-1
- [Around 15.5 percent of people](#) in the U.S. aged 14-49 have HSV-2<sup>2</sup>
- Receiving oral sex from somebody who has [cold sores](#) around their mouth significantly raises the risk of becoming infected.
- You cannot get genital herpes from a toilet seat.
- People who have genital herpes are more susceptible to [HIV](#).

## Herpes simplex virus is highly contagious

The herpes simplex virus (HSV) is easily transmissible between humans. It is passed from one person to another by close, direct contact. The most common mode of transmission is through vaginal, anal, or oral sex.

When somebody becomes infected with HSV, it will generally remain dormant.

If symptoms do occur, they can include blisters on the genitals or sores around the mouth.

Most people who are infected with HSV do not know it because their symptoms are so slight, and many people have no discernible symptoms at all.

## Symptoms of genital herpes



*Cold sores can be a symptom of primary infection.*

Most people do not have apparent symptoms for many months, or even years after becoming infected. Those who do have symptoms during the initial period will usually notice them about 4-7 days after being infected.

## Primary infection symptoms

Primary infection is a term used for an outbreak of genital herpes that occurs when a person is first infected.

Primary infection symptoms, if they are experienced, are usually more severe than later recurrences.

Symptoms can last up to **20 days** and may include:

- Blisters and ulceration on the cervix
- Vaginal discharge

- Pain when urinating
- High temperature (**fever**)
- Malaise (feeling unwell)
- Cold sores around the mouth
- Red blisters - these are generally painful; they soon burst and leave ulcers on the external genital area, thighs, buttocks, and rectum

In most cases, the ulcers will heal, and the patient will not have any lasting scars.

## Recurrent infection symptoms

These symptoms tend to be less severe and do not last as long because the patient's body has built up some immunity to the virus. In most cases, symptoms will not last for more than 10 days.

- Burning/tingling around genitals before blisters appear
- Women may have blisters and ulceration on the cervix
- Cold sores around the mouth
- Red blisters - these are generally painful; they soon burst and leave ulcers on the external genital area, thighs, buttocks, and rectum

Eventually, recurrences happen less often and are much less severe. Patients with HSV-1 will have **fewer recurrences** and less severe symptoms than people infected with HSV-2.

## What causes genital herpes?

When HSV is present on the surface of the skin of an infected person it can easily be passed on to someone else through the moist skin which lines the mouth, anus, and genitals. The virus may also pass on to another individual through other areas of human skin, as well as the eyes.

A human cannot become infected by touching an object, (working surface, washbasin, or towel) that has been touched by an infected person.

Infection can occur in the following ways:

- Having unprotected vaginal or anal sex
- Having oral sex with a person who gets cold sores
- Sharing sex toys
- Having genital contact with an infected person

HSV leaves the skin just before a blister appears. The virus is most likely to be passed on just before the blister appears, when it is visible, and until the blister is completely healed. HSV can still be passed on to another person when there are no signs of an outbreak (but it is less likely).

If a mother with genital herpes has sores while giving birth, it is possible that the infection will be passed on to the baby (see section on pregnancy below).

## Genital herpes diagnosis

Anybody who has genital herpes symptoms should see their doctor or go to a sexual health clinic or a genito-urinary medicine (GUM) clinic. Anything discussed or discovered is completely confidential.

A doctor may refer the patient to a specialist. Before doing so, they will ask the patient some questions regarding possible signs and symptoms and carry out an examination.

Herpes is much easier to diagnose when the infection is still present.

A doctor will **take a swab** sample of fluid from the infected area - this may require gently breaking the blister. The sample will be sent to a laboratory. If the result comes back negative, it does not necessarily mean the person does not have genital herpes. Confirmation is more likely if the patient has subsequent recurrences.

Blood tests can also be used to find out if a person is infected. However, blood tests may miss very recent infections.

## Diagnosing recurrent infections of genital herpes

Anybody who has a recurrent bout of genital herpes should see their doctor. The doctor will ask about the symptoms and previous bouts. They will also try to find out whether this outbreak or previous ones might have been triggered by something, such as illness or [stress](#).

The doctor will examine the genital area to determine the severity of the infection.

## Treatments for genital herpes

### Self-help



Bathing in lightly salted water may help relieve your symptoms

- OTC painkillers - acetaminophen or ibuprofen.
- Some people find that bathing in lightly salted water helps relieve symptoms.
- Ice packs can help. Make sure the ice is wrapped in something - do not apply ice directly to the skin.
- Apply Vaseline (or some other petroleum jelly) to the affected area.
- If urinating is painful, apply some cream or lotion to the urethra, for example, lidocaine. Some people find that if they urinate while sitting in warm water, it is less painful.
- Avoid tight clothing around the affected area.
- Wash hands thoroughly, especially after touching the affected area.

- Refrain from sexual activity until symptoms have gone.

## Medication

There is no drug that can get rid of the virus. The doctor may prescribe an antiviral, such as acyclovir. It prevents the virus from multiplying.

Antiviral tablets will help the outbreak clear up faster - they will also help reduce the severity of symptoms.

Antivirals are generally given the first time a patient has symptoms.

As recurrent outbreaks are milder, treatment is not usually necessary.

## Episodic treatment and suppressive treatment

- **Episodic treatment** - this is generally for patients who have less than six recurrences in one year. A 5-day course of antivirals is prescribed each time symptoms appear.
- **Suppressive treatment** - if a patient has more than six recurrences in a year, or if symptoms are very severe, the patient may be recommended to take daily antiviral treatment indefinitely. The aim here is to prevent further recurrences. Although suppressive treatment significantly reduces the risk of passing HSV to a partner, there is still a risk.

## Genital herpes during pregnancy

If a mother became infected before she got pregnant, the risk of infecting her baby is very low. This is because her antibodies are passed on to the baby. The longer the mother had the infection before becoming pregnant, the better her immunity will be, and that will be passed on to the baby. Those antibodies **protect the baby** during the birth and for many months afterward.

For a woman who became infected during the first 13 weeks (first trimester) of her pregnancy, the risk of infecting the baby is slightly higher. If infection happens later in the pregnancy, the risk continues to increase. Most women who became infected during

their pregnancy are advised to take acyclovir (antiviral medication) during their pregnancy.

The risk of passing the infection on to the baby is considerably higher if the mother became infected during the late stage of pregnancy. The baby may acquire the infection during or just before the birth. Doctors will often advise the mother to have a [cesarean section](#) delivery.

A mother who has recurrent infections of genital herpes during the third trimester of her pregnancy may need to have a cesarean section if she has blisters and ulcers in her genital area around the date of the birth. Most doctors will not advise a cesarean section delivery if there are no sores and the mother has been infected since before she got pregnant, as the risk of passing the infection on to the baby is very small.