

# Herpes Simplex Infection

## What is a Herpes Simplex Infection?

Herpes simplex is a viral infection that causes blisters to appear. There is no cure for herpes simplex, but it can be treated. If you get herpes, you have the virus in your body for life. Medicine can help relieve your symptoms. It can also reduce how often you have outbreaks of the infection.

There are two types of herpes simplex virus:

- herpes simplex 1, or oral herpes (often causes blisters or “cold sores” on the lips and mouth)
- herpes simplex 2, or genital herpes (often causes blisters on the perineum, anus, penis or vagina).

You can get either type in any part of your body. Once you get herpes, you can have an outbreak (appearance of cold sores or genital blisters). How often these outbreaks occur varies from person to person.

Repeat outbreaks of genital herpes are common, especially during the first year after infection.

Repeat outbreaks are usually shorter and less severe than the first outbreak. Although the virus can stay in the body for the rest of your life, the number of outbreaks tend to decrease over several years.

## Who Can Get the Infection?

Anyone can get herpes. Your health care provider will confirm genital herpes by looking at your symptoms. They may also give you some tests to show if you have the virus.

## How Is the Infection Spread?

Herpes is spread easily from person to person by:

- saliva or genital secretions
- skin-to-skin contact with an open sore on an infected person (such as kissing or oral sex)
- sexual contact, including vaginal, anal and oral sex.

Infected people can spread the disease to others even if they are not showing any symptoms. Since a lack of symptoms does not mean a person is not infected, people need to ask their sex partners if they have herpes.

Sometimes people with blisters on their genitals spread the infection to their own eyes or mouth with their hands. That’s why handwashing is so important in preventing the spread of herpes.

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## What Are the Herpes Symptoms?

- Many people who have herpes do not know it. Most people who have herpes have no or mild symptoms. Mild symptoms may be mistaken for another skin condition such as a pimple or ingrown hair.
- Symptoms include burning, itching feeling and redness in the affected area before any blisters appear. Within a day, painful clusters of fluid-filled blisters start to show.

Within 3 weeks, these blisters heal and scab, leaving a scar that goes away with time. The virus will then become inactive and hide in the body until the next outbreak. The first outbreak may also include flu-like symptoms such as fever, body aches or swollen glands.

A severe reaction to herpes can cause intense pain. People with weak immune systems — like those who have HIV — can get blisters over their entire bodies that can last for months, meningitis, or get lesions on their buttocks, groin, thigh(s), finger(s) or eye(s).

- An outbreak inside the urethra, where urine is discharged may cause pain during urination.
- An outbreak near the buttocks may make bowel movements painful.
- Women may get an outbreak in the vagina. This causes an itching or burning feeling in the genital area. There may also be some discharge and a feeling of pressure. Herpes blisters in the vagina can be hard to see. In some cases, women don't even know they have herpes.
- There may be fever, swollen glands, headaches and backaches in some people.

## What is the Treatment for Herpes?

Herpes cannot be cured but can be managed with medicine. Antiviral medicine for herpes can be taken each day. This can lower your risk of spreading the infection to your partner.

Medicines can also relieve pain and reduce the number of blisters and outbreaks. The sooner treatment can start, the sooner symptoms can be relieved.

Call your health care provider as soon as possible if you think you have been exposed to the herpes simplex virus.

## What Are the Side Effects of Herpes?

- for everyone: The open sores and blisters make it easier to get infections, especially HIV (the AIDS virus), which can enter through broken skin. People with HIV and open sores from herpes can give HIV to others.
- for women: A woman with herpes can pass the virus to her baby during delivery. Tell your doctor if you have genital herpes during your prenatal visits.

Babies have weak immune systems. The herpes virus can infect cells of a baby's nervous system, including the brain. Babies who are infected with herpes at birth have a high risk of death.

## What Prevents the Spread of Herpes?

To prevent the spread of oral herpes:

- Don't kiss or have oral sex with anyone if you or they have a cold sore on the mouth, lips or genital area.

To prevent the spread of genital herpes:

- Avoid sexual contact if you have herpes.
- Use a condom. (Outbreaks can occur in areas not covered by a condom.)
- Talk with your sex partner(s) to see if either of you has herpes.

## Information adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.