



How is genital herpes diagnosed?

If you have any symptoms, a doctor or nurse can diagnose genital herpes by looking at the blisters or sores and taking a swab of a blister or sore, which is sent away to be tested.

In some sexual health clinics and under certain circumstances a blood test can also be used to confirm that you have the virus.

Where can I get a herpes test?

You can be tested for genital herpes at a sexual health clinic or by your GP. To find your nearest sexual health clinic go to www.tht.org.uk or call THT Direct on 0845 12 21 200 or NHS Direct on 0845 4647.

Treatment

There is no cure for genital herpes but there are effective treatments. The first time you get symptoms you might be treated with anti-viral drugs, which reduce the length and severity of the episode. After that, most recurrences are mild and don't require any treatment other than salt water bathing of sores or pain-killing creams or sprays.

If you do have frequent or severe symptoms you can get ongoing treatment with anti-viral drugs to prevent this.

How can I reduce the risk of getting or passing on herpes?

You should avoid having sex if you or your partner has a genital herpes sore or a cold sore (or feel one might be starting). During this time there is a high risk you might get or pass on herpes.

In general, reducing the number of partners you have and always using condoms (and using them correctly) will help to reduce your risk of getting or passing on the herpes virus. However, condoms won't necessarily protect you completely as they don't always cover the whole area that is affected. The virus can spread by touching the sores and then touching other parts of your body. Therefore washing your hands is important, especially if handling contact lenses.

Sexually transmitted infections for men



Herpes

Get it checked. Get it treated.



Supported by



Royal Society of Medicine, 1 Wimpole Street, London W1G 0AE
Tel: 020 7290 2968 Email: bashh@rsm.ac.uk Website: www.bashh.org

The HIV and sexual health charity for life

Website: www.tht.org.uk THT Direct: 0845 12 21 200
Registered office: 314-320 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8DP
Tel: 020 7812 1600 Email: info@tht.org.uk

© Terrence Higgins Trust, April 2007 1st Edition. Code 164
Terrence Higgins Trust is a registered charity no. 288527. Company reg. no. 1778149.
Registered in England. A company limited by guarantee.
Design Felton Communication 020 7405 0900 Ref: 9865.1

This leaflet on genital herpes is one of a series that has been designed to give you essential information on sexually transmitted infections (STIs). It's important that you know about STIs as they are more common than many people think, and some can cause serious health problems if they aren't diagnosed and treated.

What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes causes ulcers or sores on the skin. It is an infection caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV).

There are two types of HSV virus:

- type 1 usually affects the mouth and lips, causing 'cold sores', but it can also affect the genitals (genital herpes)
- type 2 usually affects the genital area (genital herpes).

Once you have been infected with the virus you may have symptoms around your genitals and mouth. After these heal the virus sits dormant in your nervous system for life, although it may from time-to-time cause symptoms.

Not everyone infected with herpes gets symptoms and not everyone who has symptoms of herpes the first time gets them again. Certain factors such as sunbathing, stress, being run down or friction during sex can bring on symptoms.

Genital herpes can carry an extra risk for pregnant women. The vast majority of women with genital herpes will have safe pregnancies and give birth normally. However, a severe first episode of herpes during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy may lead to miscarriage and a first episode in the last 12 weeks can pose a risk to the baby when it is born.

How is genital herpes transmitted?

You can get genital herpes through skin-to-skin contact with someone who has the infection. So you are at risk during vaginal, anal or oral sex. There is also a risk with any sexual contact between your genitals and those of someone with herpes ulcers on their genitals or 'cold sores' on their lips.

If someone has the virus they can pass it on from the moment they feel a sore starting, right up until when the last sore has healed (sores take about two to four weeks to heal). However, genital herpes can be infectious whether or not the person with the virus has any symptoms. Sometimes symptoms can be so mild that people may be unaware that they have herpes and can give it to others.

If your partner is pregnant it is important she lets her doctor, midwife or obstetrician know if either of you have genital herpes.

How would I know if I had genital herpes?

Genital herpes affects people in different ways and not everyone who has it will get any symptoms.

The symptoms you get during the first episode of herpes are usually the most severe. These normally appear within two weeks after you've become infected with the virus. If symptoms come back they tend to be milder, don't last as long, and over time often become less frequent.

Symptoms can appear anywhere in your genital area, but they are most common on your foreskin and the head and shaft of your penis. There may be a clear discharge from sores in or on the penis.

They can also occur on your testicles, in or around your anus, buttocks and the tops of your thighs.

An episode of genital herpes often begins with reddened skin, itching, burning or pain in the affected area, followed by painful blisters or sores. You may also experience a burning sensation when you go to the toilet. You may feel tired, achy and your glands may feel swollen.

The symptoms for women usually occur in or around the vagina, anus, buttocks or tops of thighs.

People may have several episodes (typically four or five) during the first year after they get infected. Then, over time, the number of episodes usually goes down.