



## What is herpes?

Herpes is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV), type 1 or type 2.<sup>1</sup> HSV-type 1 commonly causes fever blisters on the mouth (oral herpes), while HSV-type 2 affects the genital area (genital herpes). After someone becomes infected with HSV, he or she remains infected for life. Genital herpes is a common infection in the United States, with estimates of 776,000 new cases of herpes annually.<sup>1</sup> Nationally, 15.5% of people aged 14 – 49 years have HSV-type 2 (genital herpes).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, genital herpes is more common in women than men because infection is more easily transmitted from men to women than from women to men.<sup>1</sup>

## Health disparity: race

Genital herpes is more common among non-Hispanic blacks than among non-Hispanic whites, 41.8% and 11.3%, respectively.<sup>1</sup> Race and ethnicity in the United States are risk markers that correlate with other more fundamental determinants of health, such as poverty, access to quality health care, health-care seeking behavior, illicit drug use and living in communities with high prevalence of STDs.

## Treatment

**There is no treatment that can cure herpes**, but antiviral medications can shorten and prevent outbreaks for whatever period of time an individual takes the medication. These antiviral medications can prevent or shorten outbreaks, and taking medication daily can reduce the likelihood of transmission to partners.<sup>1</sup>

## Protect yourself!

Correct and consistent use of condoms can reduce the risk of genital herpes:

- A person with genital herpes should abstain from sexual activity with partners when sores or other symptoms are present.

## Fast facts

- Herpes is an STD caused by the herpes simplex virus, type 1 or type 2. Type 2 is the cause of genital herpes.<sup>1</sup>
- Genital herpes is more common among women than men and more common among non-Hispanic blacks.<sup>1</sup>
- 87.4% of people infected with genital herpes are unaware of their infection due to lack of symptoms or mild symptoms.<sup>1</sup>
- Antiviral medications are available to suppress the herpes virus, but once you have herpes you will always have it.<sup>1</sup>

## Reference

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <https://www.cdc.gov/std/herpes/stdfact-herpes-detailed.htm>.

## Transmission

Genital herpes infections are transmitted through contact with lesions, mucosal surfaces, genital secretions, or oral secretions.<sup>1</sup> A person can get genital herpes only during sexual contact with someone who has genital herpes infection.<sup>1</sup>

## Symptoms

Most people with genital herpes do not have any symptoms or have very mild symptoms that go unnoticed or are mistaken for another skin condition.<sup>1</sup> 87.4% of infected people remain unaware of their infection.<sup>1</sup>

When symptoms do appear, they typically present as one or more vesicles on or around the genitals, rectum or mouth.<sup>1</sup>

## Complications

Genital herpes may cause painful genital ulcers that can be severe and persistent in persons with suppressed immune systems, like HIV-positive persons.<sup>1</sup>

### More rare but serious complications are<sup>1</sup>:

- Blindness, encephalitis (inflammation of the brain)
- Aseptic meningitis
- Development of extragenital lesions on the buttocks, groin, thigh, finger or eye

Genital ulcerative disease, which is caused by herpes, can make it easier to transmit and acquire HIV sexually. There is an estimated two- to fourfold increased risk of acquiring HIV when genital herpes is present.<sup>1</sup>

## Diagnosis

Health-care providers can diagnosis genitals herpes by:

- Visual inspection
- Taking a sample from the sore(s)
- Testing to see if the herpes virus (HSV-type 1 or 2) is present