



# Genital Herpes

**Genital herpes is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections in Australia. It is caused by the herpes simplex virus, the same virus that can cause cold sores on the face. Antiviral medicines may relieve symptoms, speed healing, limit recurrences and protect against spread to others.**

There are two types of the herpes simplex virus, called HSV-1 and HSV-2.

HSV-1 is a more common cause of cold sores and HSV-2 is a more common cause of genital herpes, but both types can cause either infection.

Once a person has been infected with herpes, they have it for life.

## Symptoms

Many people have no obvious symptoms and are unaware that they have genital herpes. Some people have one initial episode (outbreak) of symptoms after becoming infected, then no further episodes. Others have recurring episodes of symptoms. Recurring episodes are caused by re-activation of herpes virus already present in the body – not by being re-infected.

When present, symptoms of genital herpes may include:

- Flu-like symptoms (e.g., feeling unwell, headaches, muscular aches, swollen glands)

- Redness and itchiness, tingling or soreness around the genital area
- Painful lesions (similar to cold sores) on or near the genitals, anus, buttocks and thighs. The lesions start as small blisters which break open to form shallow, painful sores, then scab over and heal after one to two weeks.

Symptoms are usually the most severe during the initial episode. Further outbreaks are often less painful and of shorter duration. Outbreaks may recur for years, but may become milder and less frequent over time.

Triggers for recurring episodes may include:

- Stress
- Hormone changes (e.g., menstruation)
- Poor nutrition
- Alcohol
- Illness
- Surgery
- Friction, such as that caused by vigorous sexual intercourse.

## Important

If you are concerned that you may have genital herpes, it is best to consult a doctor when symptoms are present. A doctor can then arrange a special test for the herpes virus. Genital herpes blisters are cold sores in the genital area and need not be a cause for shame or guilt, or a serious barrier to relationships. Genital herpes counselling services are available. Ask a doctor or pharmacist.

## How is it spread?

The herpes virus spreads through skin-to-skin contact and genital herpes can be spread by most forms of sexual contact. It is also possible for a person with a cold sore to transfer herpes from their mouth to their own or to their sex partner's genitals.

Contact with herpes lesions carries the greatest risk of infection and sexual contact should be avoided until all lesions have fully healed. Sometimes, however, the virus can also be passed on when no lesions are present.

A mother may pass the herpes virus to her baby during the baby's birth. Women who are pregnant or planning to become pregnant are advised to tell their doctors about their herpes, so the risks to the baby can be minimised.

Herpes simplex is a fragile virus that does not survive for long outside the human body. There have been no proven cases of genital herpes transmission from toilet seats, towels or other things used by an infected person.

## Medicines

Genital herpes can be managed with antiviral medicines and pain-relieving medicines.

**Antiviral medicines** (e.g., famciclovir, valaciclovir, aciclovir)

- A short course of antiviral medicine started as soon as possible and within 72 hours of an outbreak of symptoms can reduce the severity and duration of symptoms.
- A continuous daily dose of antiviral medicine can reduce the number and severity of outbreaks and reduce the chance of transmitting genital herpes to a sex partner.

Antiviral medicines must be prescribed by a doctor.

## Self Care

Ways to keep lesions clean and dry and to relieve discomfort include:

- Apply povidine-iodine antiseptic paint to lesions
- Expose the lesions to warm, dry air for 10-15 minutes several times a day
- Bathe the lesions with salt water (saline) – use 2 teaspoons of salt per litre of water
- Drink at least 2 litres (8 glasses) of water daily (unless advised not to by a doctor)
- Urinate while genitals are in warm water, if urination is painful. Women may prevent urine from touching lesions by separating the lips of the vulva while on the toilet
- Wear loose, cotton underpants and avoid tight trousers
- Rest.

Ways to reduce the risk of catching or passing on herpes include:

- Limit sexual contact to one person who is infection-free
- Limit the number of sex partners you have
- Use condoms, even when there are no lesions, as it is possible to pass on the infection even when no symptoms are present
- Avoid all sexual contact while you or your partner have an outbreak (any symptoms) of genital herpes or cold sores
- Avoid touching lesions and wash your hands after any contact.

The use of condoms during oral, vaginal and anal sex protects only those areas in contact with the condom. People with herpes are encouraged to tell their sex partner, so that both of you can decide what precautions to take.

## Related fact cards

- *Cold Sores*
- *Pain relievers*
- *Relaxation Techniques*

## For more information

**Australian Herpes Management Forum** – website [www.ahmf.com.au](http://www.ahmf.com.au)

**HealthInsite** – website [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

**Sexual health clinics** – listed under 'S' in the white pages of the phone book

**Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)** leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

**NPS Medicines Line** – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

**The Poisons Information Centre** – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

**Pharmacy Self Care Support** – phone 1300 369 772 and ask for the Pharmacy Self Care Field Officer.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

Sponsored by

