

Genital herpes

What is genital herpes?

A virus called herpes simplex causes genital herpes. The condition was first described in Roman times.

There are two known types of herpes simplex virus: Type 1 and Type 2. The Type 2 strain usually infects the genital area. Type 1 generally causes 'cold sores' around the mouth. However, sometimes the Type 1 virus can infect the genital area, and Type 2 the area around the mouth.

Either virus can cause the same symptoms and signs, so a pathology test is needed to distinguish the type.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Herpes sores typically appear around the genital area within a few days of sexual contact. They may be on the outside skin and/or inside the vagina, cervix, anus or rectum. There may be some itchy or stabbing sensations in the area just before the sores appear.

The sores start as fluid filled blisters and quickly break down to raw ulcers which crust over and heal, usually in a few days. They are often relatively painless, but at times can cause severe pain and discomfort.

When the sores have healed, the virus remains in the body in a dormant state. It has the potential to cause further outbreaks. Recurrent outbreaks can occur in response to illness, physical or mental stress, a binge on alcohol or other drugs, loss of sleep, or they may come completely out of the blue. With time, the recurrent attacks generally become less frequent and less severe as the body's immune system responds to the virus.

The sores are most conta-

rious in the early stages of the outbreak, but it is safest to avoid sex until the skin has completely healed. Some people may unknowingly spread the virus in their genital secretions. Consistent use of condoms may help in preventing transmission.

Recent research suggests many people exposed to genital herpes have never had a typical attack. The herpes virus has entered their body and gone straight into its dormant state. Many of these people will never have an outbreak. For some, their first outbreak may be many years after they were infected.

How can herpes be prevented?

People who have had herpes need to be aware of the first symptoms of an attack and avoid sex until the outbreak is over. This should also apply to people with cold sores around the mouth to prevent possibly passing it on during oral sex.

If condoms are used, there may be less chance of passing on the virus, but this cannot be guaranteed. It is important to find out what triggers an attack and avoid these things. A healthy lifestyle is important - a good diet, regular exercise and enough sleep.

Is there any treatment for herpes?

There is no cure to rid the virus from the body, but there are ways to control the outbreaks.

Outbreaks often clear up quickly with no treatment necessary.

Salt water bathing can reduce any pain and irritation and can help healing. Creams and ointments may delay heal-

ing. They should be avoided unless specifically recommended by your doctor.

For the minority of people who have frequent or severe recurrent attacks of herpes, a medication called acyclovir is available on prescription. It can suppress outbreaks of herpes completely, if taken on a daily basis.

Many people recommend the use of zinc supplements or lysine to prevent further attacks. However, there is no scientific evidence to suggest these treatments work.

Who can have particular problems with herpes?

Pregnant women and those planning a pregnancy should tell their doctor if they get genital herpes. The same applies if their regular sexual partner gets herpes. This is because in a small number of cases, the baby can get infected with the virus during the birth. Ways to reduce the likelihood of harm need to be discussed.

People with HIV infection or whose immune systems are not functioning normally may have problems controlling herpes infection. They should talk to their doctor also.

This article was prepared with the help of the Sexual Health Service (SHAIDS). SHAIDS can provide confidential advice on herpes and other sexually transmitted diseases (phone 20 2980). Your local general practitioner is also a good source of advice and information about these infections.