Genital herpes

Looking after your sexual health
Genital herpes

Genital herpes is a common sexually transmitted infection (STI). It is caused by a virus called Herpes simplex. Most people get genital herpes quite mildly but some will have painful symptoms. Medication, education and self-help treatment help to reduce symptoms and limit the number of herpes outbreaks.

This booklet gives you information about genital herpes, what you can do if you are worried that you might have the infection and advice on how to protect yourself.

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What causes genital herpes?
Genital herpes is caused by the virus Herpes simplex (HSV). There are two types, HSV I and HSV II. Both types can infect the genital and anal area (genital herpes) and also the mouth and nose (cold sores) and fingers and hand (whitlows).

The virus enters the body through small cracks in the skin or through the moist soft lining (mucous membranes) of the mouth, vagina, rectum, urethra (tube where urine comes out) and under the foreskin. Following an infection by the Herpes simplex virus some people will experience an outbreak of genital herpes (see page 5). The virus then becomes dormant (inactive) and remains in the body where you were infected. During this time it is not infectious and does not cause signs or symptoms. In some
people the virus can become active again from time to time and cause further outbreaks of genital herpes – known as recurrent outbreaks (see page 6).

How is genital herpes passed on?
Genital herpes can be passed from one person to another during sexual contact. Anyone who is sexually active can get the virus. Both men and women can have genital herpes, and pass it on.

The Herpes simplex virus is most likely to be passed on just before, during or straight after an outbreak.
Genital herpes can be passed on:

• From one person to another during vaginal or anal sex, or by sharing sex toys.

• By skin to skin contact during sex. It can be passed on by close genital contact – you don’t need to have penetrative sex (vaginal or anal) to pass it on.

• By skin to skin contact during sex if the virus is active on the skin outside the area protected by a condom or latex square.

• If you receive oral sex from someone who has a cold sore or is just about to get one.

• If a person with herpes on the hand or finger touches a partner’s vagina, genitals or anal area.

It is possible for a pregnant woman to pass the virus to her baby if she is having an outbreak at the time of giving birth (see page 13).

If you already have one type of Herpes simplex virus it is still possible for you to get the other type although you may not notice symptoms.

You cannot get genital herpes from hugging, sharing baths or towels, from swimming pools, toilet seats or from sharing cups, plates or cutlery.
Can I pass the virus to a partner when I have no signs or symptoms?
In some people the body can shed the virus from the skin or mucous membranes without there being any signs or symptoms of genital herpes. This is called asymptomatic shedding or viral shedding. It is possible to pass the virus on during periods of asymptomatic shedding but for most people the risk is low. Shedding is higher in the first year after infection and if you have frequent outbreaks. The longer the time between outbreaks the less likely you are to have any asymptomatic shedding.

What are the signs and symptoms of the first outbreak of genital herpes?
Many people will not have any visible signs or symptoms at all, or not be aware of them.
Some people will get symptoms within 4–5 days of coming into contact with the virus. In other people the virus may be in the body for several weeks, months or possibly years before any signs or symptoms appear. Therefore, when you get symptoms it doesn’t necessarily mean you’ve only just come into contact with the virus.

If you do get signs or symptoms, they usually follow a pattern. You may have some or all of the following:
- Feeling generally unwell with flu-like symptoms such as fever, tiredness, headache, swollen glands, aches and pains in the lower back and down the legs or in the groin. This will be followed by:
- Stinging, tingling or itching in the genital or anal area.
- Small, fluid-filled blisters anywhere in the genital or anal area, on the buttocks and the tops of the thighs. These quickly burst within a day or two leaving small red sores which can be very
painless.
• Pain when passing urine (peeing) caused by the urine flowing over the sores.

What are the signs and symptoms of recurrent genital herpes?
Signs and symptoms of recurrent outbreaks are usually milder than with the first outbreak and clear up more quickly (in about a week).

There is often an early warning tingling sensation and you may get a flu-like illness before an outbreak. The blisters and sores are usually fewer, smaller, and less painful and heal more quickly. They normally appear in the same part of the body as in previous outbreaks but in some people they may appear nearby.

How will I know if I have the virus?
You can only be certain you have genital herpes if you have a check-up when you've got signs or symptoms. You could have genital herpes even if your partner(s) has never had an outbreak.

It is possible to have more than one sexually transmitted infection at the same time. You may wish to have a check-up for infection if:
• you, or a partner have, or think you might have, symptoms
• you have recently had unprotected sex with a new partner
• you, or a partner, have had unprotected sex with other partners
• a sexual partner tells you they have a sexually transmitted infection
• you have another sexually transmitted infection
• you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy.

Having genital herpes can mean you are more at
risk of becoming infected with HIV if you’re having sex with an HIV positive partner or of passing it on if you already have HIV.

**How soon after sex can I have a check-up?**

You can have a check-up as soon as you have signs or symptoms. There is no routine test for genital herpes if you do not have signs or symptoms.

**What does the check-up involve?**

In many cases, a doctor or nurse may diagnose genital herpes by looking at the affected skin. They will want to confirm this by taking a swab of fluid from the infected area, if they can. They may gently break a blister to get a sample of the fluid inside. The swab will then be sent to the laboratory and the result will usually be known within 1–2 weeks.

A swab looks a bit like a cotton bud, but is smaller and rounded. It sometimes has a small plastic loop on the end rather than a cotton tip. It is wiped over the parts of the body that could be infected and easily picks up samples of fluid. This only takes a few seconds and may sting for a moment if the blisters and sores are tender.

There is a specific blood test that can be done to look for antibodies to the virus. This is not used as a routine test for genital herpes.

Cervical screening tests and routine blood tests do **not** detect the Herpes simplex virus.

**How accurate are the tests?**

No tests are 100 per cent accurate. It is easier to diagnose genital herpes at the beginning of an outbreak when it is possible to take a sample of fluid from a blister or sore before it starts to heal. An accurate diagnosis will depend on the amount
of virus that is being shed at the time, the stage of the blisters or sores and the type of test that is used on the swab specimen. The doctor or nurse will talk to you about how accurate your test result might be.

**Where can I get a check-up?**
There are a number of services you can go to. Choose the service you feel most comfortable with.

- A genital herpes check-up can be done at:
  - a genitourinary medicine (GUM) or sexual health clinic
  - your general practice (ask a doctor or practice nurse)
  - some contraception clinics and young people's services.

**Will I have to pay for tests and treatment?**
All tests are free through NHS services. Treatment is also free unless you go to your general practice when you may have to pay a prescription charge for the treatment.

**What is the treatment for genital herpes?**
The aim of the treatment is to relieve the pain, and to prevent the virus from multiplying.

- Treatment is recommended when you have the first outbreak as this may provide some relief.
- Treatment is usually started within five days of the start of the first outbreak and while new blisters or sores are still forming. It involves taking antiviral tablets daily (sometimes up to five times a day) for five days. There are several different antiviral tablets that can be used.
• Some people find it helpful to take antiviral treatment when they get another outbreak of genital herpes. You may be given some tablets to take at home. These need to be started as soon as the outbreak begins.

• People who have repeated outbreaks (usually more than six in a year) may be given longer courses of the tablets to try to reduce the number of outbreaks. This is known as suppressive therapy.

• If you are pregnant, or trying to become pregnant, tell the doctor or nurse so they can talk to you about pregnancy and Herpes simplex. If you have an outbreak of herpes in pregnancy it is still possible to have treatment (see page 13).

• As genital herpes is caused by a virus and not bacteria, antibiotics will not help.

• The treatment you can buy for facial cold sores is not suitable for genital herpes.

Is there anything I can do myself to ease the discomfort?

There are several things you can do to ease the discomfort and speed up the healing process:

• Apply an ice pack. Put ice cubes in a plastic bag and then wrap them in a clean towel or flannel. Put them on the sores for up to an hour or so. Ice should not be put directly onto the skin.

• Put cold, wet tea bags on the sores. They are soothing and speed up healing.

• Take a cool shower to soothe the sores.

• Apply a local anaesthetic ointment such as lidocaine. This will help relieve the pain. You can buy this from the pharmacy.

• Avoid washing too often, and dab the area gently to dry it.