Genital herpes is a common sexually transmitted infection (STI). It is caused by a virus called herpes simplex which can spread if you have vaginal, anal or oral sex, or share sex toys. The condition can be stressful and painful. Effective advice, medication and self-help treatment can make a major difference to your quality of life.

This leaflet gives you information about genital herpes, advice on how to protect yourself and how to get treated if you think you might have the virus.

Genital herpes

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What causes genital herpes?
Genital herpes is caused by a virus which is easily passed from one person to another through sexual contact. Anyone who is sexually active can get the virus. Both men and women can have genital herpes, and pass it on.

Often there are no symptoms or they may be so mild that you do not know you have the virus.

Herpes is a viral infection which comes in many forms. There are two types of the virus – known as herpes simplex virus I and II – which are found on the mouth and nose (cold sores); on the genital and anal area; and on the eyes, fingers and hands. This leaflet is about genital herpes.

How is genital herpes passed on?
Genital herpes can be passed from one person to another during sex with someone who is having an outbreak of genital herpes at the time or by skin-to-skin contact with a herpes simplex sore. Once you have the virus, it can remain in the body and may be passed on before symptoms are noticeable, or after they’ve disappeared.

An outbreak or attack of genital herpes is usually called an episode. Blisters or sores can be external or internal. In women, blisters or sores can be found on or in the vagina, vulva (the lips around the opening to the vagina), cervix (entrance to the womb), rectum (back passage) and anus (the opening to the back passage). In men, blisters or sores can be found on and around the penis and rectum, and on or inside the anus.

Genital herpes can spread if you have vaginal, anal or oral sex, or share sex toys. Sometimes it can be passed on just by close intimate contact.
In rare cases, it is possible for a pregnant woman to pass the virus to her baby at birth.

You cannot get herpes from hugging, sharing baths or towels, from swimming pools, toilet seats or from sharing cups, plates or cutlery.

How can I protect myself from genital herpes?
The blisters and sores are highly infectious so if you or your partner has cold sores or genital herpes, here are some guidelines to protect you:

- Avoid kissing when you or your partner has cold sores around the mouth.
- Avoid oral sex when you or your partner has mouth or genital sores.
- Avoid any genital or anal contact when you or your partner has genital sores.
- Avoid vaginal, anal or oral sex if you feel an episode starting.

It is possible to get herpes simplex by having sex with someone who has the virus but has never noticed any signs or symptoms. Using a condom correctly may reduce your chance of getting or passing on genital herpes.

- If you are not sure how to use condoms correctly, call FPA (see page 11) for a free leaflet about male and female condoms.
- If you’re not happy with the condoms you have tried already, why not try a different brand or type? They come in a variety of shapes and sizes.
- Avoid sharing sex toys – if they are shared, wash them or cover them with a new condom before anyone else uses them.
- For oral sex, cover the penis with a condom or the female genitals with a latex square (dental dam).
These measures can also help to protect you from some other STIs such as HIV, chlamydia and gonorrhoea.

What are the signs and symptoms?
It can take from two days to several weeks or longer after coming into contact with the virus before any signs or symptoms appear. In most people it takes around 3-4 days. Many people will not have any visible signs or symptoms at all, or not be aware of them.

If you do get symptoms, here are the usual patterns.

First episode of genital herpes
You may have some or all of the following:
- small, fluid-filled blisters anywhere in the genital or anal area which quickly burst leaving small red sores which can be painful
- stinging, tingling or itching in the genital or anal area
- 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
- pain passing urine.

Recurrent genital herpes
Many people will never get another episode after the first one. In those who do, the symptoms are usually much milder and clear up more quickly (in about a week). Often there is an early warning tingling sensation before an episode. The blisters and sores are fewer, smaller, less painful and heal more quickly, and there are no flu-like symptoms.
When can I have a test?

You can have a test as soon as you have signs or symptoms for the doctor or nurse to look at. Laboratory tests will confirm their opinion. Results will usually be known within 1-2 weeks. There is no routine test for herpes if you do not have signs or symptoms, such as blisters.

You can go to a genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinic, a sexual health clinic or to your GP. If your GP doesn’t offer testing, they will refer you to a clinic that does. A leaflet Sexually transmitted infections – where to go for help and advice is available free from fpa (see page 11).

It is not uncommon to have more than one STI at any one time, so ask about being tested for others.

What does the test involve?

In most cases, a doctor or nurse can tell if you have herpes simplex just by looking.

The doctor or nurse will use a swab to collect a sample of fluid from the infected area and may break a blister gently to get a sample of the fluid inside. They may also ask you to give a urine and blood sample as part of a full sexual health screening.

There are many myths about how swabs are done. A swab looks a bit like a cotton bud, but is smaller, soft and rounded. The swab is wiped over the parts of the body that could be infected and easily picks up samples of fluid. It only takes a few seconds and may sting for a moment if the blisters and sores are tender.

No tests are 100% accurate, but herpes tests will pick up almost all infections.
Cervical smear tests and routine blood tests do not detect viruses such as herpes simplex.

What is the treatment for genital herpes?
The aims of treatment are to relieve pain, and to prevent the virus from multiplying. Treatment involves taking antiviral tablets. There are several different antiviral tablets that can be used. A first episode of genital herpes can be quite severe and early treatment may give tremendous relief. As genital herpes is caused by a virus and not bacteria, antibiotics will not help.

There are several things you can do to ease the discomfort and speed up the healing process. Here are some ideas you can try.

- Apply an ice pack. Wrap ice cubes in a clean towel or flannel and put it on the sores for an hour or so. Putting this in a plastic bag can stop dripping.
- Tea bags, cold and wet, are soothing and speed up healing.
- A cool shower may help to soothe the sores.
- Bathing in warm, salted water can help too.
- If passing urine is painful, do it in a warm bath or shower.
- Drink extra fluids, such as water or soft drinks.
- Wear loose clothing.
- Use a mild painkiller if you need it.

Unlike cold sores that appear on other parts of the body, there are no treatments for genital herpes that you can buy without a prescription.

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,