Helplines and websites

- Call sexual health direct, run by fpa on 0845 122 8690 for confidential information and advice on sexually transmitted infections, contraception, pregnancy choices, abortion and planning a pregnancy or visit www.fpa.org.uk.

- Call the Herpes Viruses Association on 0845 123 2305 or visit www.hva.org.uk for specialist advice on genital herpes.

- For confidential information about sexually transmitted infections, sexual health or where to find local services call the Sexual Health Line on 0800 567 123. Textphone 0800 521 361. Lines are open 24 hours a day.

- Visit www.condomessentialwear.co.uk and www.ssha.info (Society of Sexual Health Advisers).

- Young people under 25 can also call Brook on 0800 0185 023 or visit www.brook.org.uk.


A final word

The information in this booklet is based on evidence-based guidance produced by The British Association of Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH). Different people may give you different information and advice about certain points.
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.

### 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).
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:

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 12).

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.
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.

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.

- 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 painful.
- Pain when passing urine (peeing) caused by the urine flowing over the sores.

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.
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 12).

- 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.

- 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...
aspects of your life. Common triggers can include:

- being ill, run down, tired or stressed
- different times in the menstrual cycle
- friction from sex or masturbation
- ultraviolet light on the affected skin area (sunbathing or using sun beds)
- tight clothing and nylon or lycra underwear
- drinking alcohol or smoking.

Recurrences eventually stop altogether within 18–24 months for many people, although it may take much longer for others.

Do I need a follow-up appointment?

Not necessarily. If the doctor or nurse would like to test for other sexually transmitted infections you may be asked to go back when the outbreak is over. This will be a good time to ask the doctor or nurse any other questions you may have.

What happens if genital herpes isn’t treated?

It is not essential to have treatment as genital herpes will clear up by itself. However, prompt treatment at the start of an outbreak can be a great help – it can reduce the time the outbreak lasts, help the healing process and can reduce the risk of you passing the virus on to someone else.

How soon can I have sex again?

It is strongly advised that you do not have any sexual intercourse, including vaginal, anal or oral sex, if you know an outbreak is coming, while you have signs and symptoms, and for a week after the symptoms have gone. This is to help prevent you passing the infection on to someone else. Having sex while you have
healthy babies. Genital herpes can be safely treated during pregnancy.

If you get genital herpes before you get pregnant the risk of passing it on to your baby at birth is very low and you do not usually need to have a caesarean delivery.

If you get genital herpes for the first time after you have become pregnant this may be more serious. If the first outbreak of genital herpes occurs in the first three months of pregnancy, there is a small risk of miscarriage.

If you catch genital herpes for the first time late in your pregnancy you will not have time to pass on your immunity to your baby and the virus can be passed to the baby during vaginal delivery. In these cases a caesarean birth is often recommended.

Repeat outbreaks of genital herpes during pregnancy pose little risk to the baby at birth but you may be given some treatment to prevent an outbreak occurring when you are due to give birth.

You can get more information on genital herpes in pregnancy from www.rcog.org.uk.

Does genital herpes cause cervical cancer?
No. There is no evidence that genital herpes causes cervical cancer.

How can I help protect myself from genital herpes and other sexually transmitted infections?
The blisters and sores are highly infectious, so if you or a partner have cold sores or genital herpes:
- Avoid kissing when you, or a partner, have cold sores around the mouth.
- Avoid oral sex when you, or a partner, have mouth or genital sores.
Avoid any genital or anal contact when you, or a partner, have genital sores or blisters, or if you feel an outbreak starting.

It is possible to get genital herpes and other sexually transmitted infections by having sex with someone who has the infection but has no symptoms. The following measures will help protect you from genital herpes and most other sexually transmitted infections including HIV, chlamydia and gonorrhoea.

If you have a sexually transmitted infection without knowing it they will also help prevent you from passing it on to a partner.

- Use condoms (male or female) every time you have vaginal or anal sex.
- If you have oral sex, cover the penis with a condom or the female genitals and male or female anus with a latex or polyurethane (soft plastic) square.
- If you are a woman and rub your vulva against a female partner’s vulva one of you should cover the genitals with a latex or polyurethane square.
- If you are not sure how to use condoms correctly visit www.fpa.org.uk for more information, or call fpa’s helpline (see Where can I get more information and advice? below).
- Avoid sharing sex toys. If you do share them, wash them or cover them with a new condom before anyone else uses them.

Where can I get more information and advice?
Call sexual health direct, run by fpa, for confidential information and advice on all sexually transmitted infections, contraception, pregnancy choices, abortion and planning a pregnancy. We can also give you details of sexual health services and a wide range of booklets, including a guide to male and female condoms.

fpa helplines

England
0845 122 8690
9am to 6pm Monday to Friday

Northern Ireland
0845 122 8687
9am to 5pm Monday to Thursday
9am to 4.30pm Friday

or visit fpa’s website www.fpa.org.uk

Details of clinics can be found in your local directory under sexual health, genitourinary medicine (GUM) or sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Using a service

- Wherever you go, you shouldn’t be judged because of your sexual behaviour.
- All advice, information and tests are free. All services are confidential.
- All tests are optional and should only be done with your permission.
- Ask as many questions as you need to – and make sure you get answers you understand.
- The staff will offer you as much support as you need, particularly if you need help on how to tell a partner.
Helplines and websites

- Call sexual health direct, run by fpa on 0845 122 8690 for confidential information and advice on sexually transmitted infections, contraception, pregnancy choices, abortion and planning a pregnancy or visit www.fpa.org.uk.

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