

Genital Herpes

What is genital herpes?

Herpes can be caused by two different herpes simplex viruses, HSV type I (oral) and HSV type II (anogenital). Most cases of genital herpes are caused by Type II but infection by Type I is also possible.

How common is it?

Worldwide, herpes is a common viral sexually transmitted infection (STI) that affects an estimated 16% of individuals ages 14–49.

How do you get it?

You can give or get herpes whenever there is direct skin-to-skin contact and during sex.

What are the symptoms?

The first genital herpes outbreak is typically the most severe and can include a painful genital blister-like rash, burning with urination, fever, tender and swollen lymph nodes in the groin, and headache. In some people, the infection is more mild. Clinical recurrences of genital herpes are common, but are typically less severe than the first outbreak. Recurrences are often unpredictable and vary from person to person.

How is it diagnosed?

Most cases of genital herpes are diagnosed clinically, meaning a medical provider must examine a client to confirm the infection is present. Routine screening for individuals who are not having symptoms of genital herpes is not recommended.

How is it prevented?

You can lower the risk of getting genital herpes by using condoms. But condoms sometimes don't cover all infected areas so there's a chance of still getting or passing on genital herpes even when condoms are used.

How is it treated?

Once you have the herpes virus, it will live in your body forever. Antiviral medications help to suppress outbreaks and minimize the symptoms, but there is no cure for herpes.

Should my sex partners get treated too?

You should avoid sexual contact during an outbreak since this is when you are most likely to spread genital herpes to your sexual partners. Your partners should be checked if they are experiencing symptoms of genital herpes but there is no screening test for HSV.

Special considerations with HIV?

An HIV-negative person with an open genital ulcer from genital herpes has an increased risk of acquiring HIV (in the absence of PrEP, U=U, or other HIV prevention methods).

People who are HIV positive may have prolonged or severe episodes of genital herpes, are at greater risk for developing drug-resistant HSV, and may require higher doses of antivirals used to suppress herpes outbreaks.

Sexual health services from San Francisco AIDS Foundation

Get free sexual health services including STI & HIV testing, PrEP, PEP, anal health care, harm reduction supplies, gender-affirming hormones & more.

We can also diagnose and treat genital herpes at Magnet, the sexual health clinic at San Francisco AIDS Foundation.

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