

WebMD PRESENTS

All About Genital Herpes

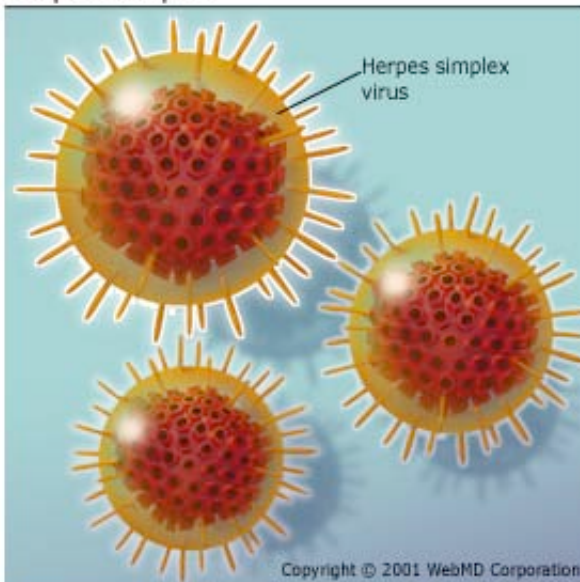


The Basics

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Genital herpes is a disease caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV), of which there are two types. Type 1 (HSV-1) usually causes oral herpes, an infection of the lips and mouth. Symptoms are commonly known as cold sores or fever blisters. In the past, HSV-1 rarely caused genital herpes, but that is changing, especially among people who begin having sex at a young age. Still, in most cases, genital herpes is caused by the second type of herpes virus (HSV-2).

Herpes Simplex



HSV-2 lives in the nerves. When it's active, it travels to the surface of the infected area (skin or mucous membrane) and makes copies of itself. This is called "shedding" because these new viruses can, at this time, rub off on another person. Then the virus travels back down the nerve to a ganglion (mass of nerve tissue), usually at the base of the spine, where it lies dormant for a while.

Who Gets Genital Herpes?

About one-fifth of all people aged 12 and up in the U.S. are infected with the HSV-2 virus that causes genital herpes, but as many as 90% don't know it. (By comparison, experts estimate 50% to 80% of adults have oral herpes.)

More women than men are infected -- one in four women compared with one in five men. One reason may be that the virus can infect a woman's genitals more easily than it can a man's. Genital herpes is more common among blacks than it is among whites, and it becomes more common as people age. The more sex partners people have, the more common it is, too.

How Is Herpes (Oral or Genital) Spread?

HSV-1 is usually passed from person to person by kissing. HSV-1 can also spread from the mouth to the genitals

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during oral sex (fellatio, cunnilingus, anilingus). If this happens, it becomes a case of genital herpes.

HSV-2 is most often passed by vaginal sex and anal sex. But just as HSV-1 can infect the genitals and cause genital herpes, HSV-2 can pass from one person's genitals to another person's mouth, resulting in oral herpes.

HSV-2 cannot survive long on a non-living surface, so there is no real risk of getting it from a toilet seat or hot tub, for example.

How Can Genital Herpes Be Prevented?

Using a latex barrier (a condom or dental dam) during sex may protect you or your partner, but only if it covers the area where the virus is shedding. You should avoid having sex if you or your partner has visible sores on the genitals, and you shouldn't receive oral sex from someone who has a sore on his or her mouth.

It's important to know that HSV can be contagious even when no symptoms are visible.

To learn more, see [Common Symptoms](#).

If you think you may have genital herpes, ask your health care provider about [Tests for Diagnosis](#). Before your appointment, check out [Preparing for Your Doctor Visit](#).

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

Reviewed by [Cynthia Haines, MD](#).

Published March 2005.

SOURCES: WebMD Medical News: "More Genital Herpes From Cold Sore Virus." Fleming, et al. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, Oct. 16, 1997; vol 337: pp 1105-1111. American Social Health Association's National Herpes Resource Center. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. MEDLINEplus Medical Encyclopedia.

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Common Symptoms

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The classic symptom of genital herpes is a cluster of small fluid-filled blisters that break, forming painful sores that crust and heal. This process can take several days.

But some people get only a rash or small bumps on the skin that appear to be pimples. Still others have different symptoms, such as painful urination, and some women have fluid discharge from the vagina.

Sores may appear four to seven days after a person is first infected. Flu-like symptoms, including fever and swollen lymph glands in the groin, may also follow the initial infection.

Symptoms come and go with no set pattern. One person may have an outbreak once a year, while another may have one every few weeks. Before a flare-up, a person may notice an itching, tingling, or burning sensation in the affected area, and there may be sharp pains in the pelvis or down the leg.

Herpes sores are usually worst the first time they appear. In later outbreaks the sores tend to be less painful and last for a shorter period of time.

The symptoms of genital herpes can affect any of the following places on the body:

- Penis
- Scrotum
- Vulva
- Vagina
- Anus
- Urethra
- Thighs
- Buttocks

However, many people with genital herpes never have symptoms, or they mistake them for another malady, such as:

- A vaginal yeast infection
- Jock itch
- Insect bites
- Hemorrhoids
- An ingrown hair

If you think you may have genital herpes, visit your doctor or a clinic to get tested. Check out [Preparing for Your Doctor Visit](#) to understand what your doctor needs to know. Also, print out [10 Questions to Ask Your Doctor](#) to make sure you get the most out of your visit.

To learn how to suppress symptoms of the virus, see [Treatment Options](#), [Alternative Treatments](#), and [New Treatments in the Pipeline](#).

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the

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Reviewed by [Cynthia Haines](#), MD.
Published March 2005.

SOURCES: ASHA, National Herpes Resource Center. NIAID (fact sheet), "Genital Herpes," Sept. 2003. MEDLINEplus Medical Encyclopedia, "Herpes genital (genital Herpes simplex)."

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Genital Herpes Quiz

? Living With Genital Herpes: Are You at Risk?

One in five adults in the U.S. has genital herpes but as many as 90% of those infected don't know it. Answer the following questions to assess your risk. Click on the "yes," "no," or "not sure" box for each question. Click "Submit" when you are finished.

1 Have you had more than five sexual partners in your lifetime?

- Yes
 No
 Not Sure

2 Has anyone with a cold sore or fever blister on the mouth ever given you oral sex?

- Yes
 No
 Not Sure

3 Have you felt itching, aching, or burning sensations in your genitals at any time since you first became sexually active?

- Yes
 No
 Not Sure

4 Have you noticed a sore, bump, or rash on your genitals at any time since your first sexual encounter?

- Yes
 No
 Not Sure

5 Have you ever noticed a sore, bump, or rash on a partner's genitals?

- Yes
 No
 Not Sure

6 Do you sometimes have intercourse without condoms?

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure

SUBMIT

This risk assessment quiz was created with the assistance of the American Social Health Association.

MEDICAL REVIEW: Reviewed by [Cynthia Haines, MD](#), August 2005.

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FAQ - How Can You Tell if You Have It?

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Genital herpes can be a confusing disease. Symptoms can look like other conditions, or there may be no symptoms at all. How to tell if you have it? These questions and answers will help.

Could I have herpes and not know?

Unless no one has ever kissed you, and unless you've never had sex, it is possible that you've picked up a herpes virus.

Oral herpes, usually caused by the herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1), shows up as cold sores or fever blisters on the mouth. Even a casual peck on the lips from someone with a cold sore can give you the virus. That's why it's so common: As many as 50% to 80% of adults in the U.S. have oral herpes.

Genital herpes, most often caused by the second type of herpes virus (HSV-2), is less common, but plenty of people still have it. Roughly one in five American adults has genital herpes. But up to 90% of those who have it don't know they are infected. You could be one of them.

What are some signs that I might have genital herpes?

Often it's hard to tell by looking. The textbook symptom of genital herpes is a cluster of small fluid-filled blisters that break, forming painful sores that crust and heal during several days. Affected areas include the penis, scrotum, vagina, vulva, urethra, anus, thighs, and buttocks.

But many people don't get these sores. Some people have no symptoms at all, while others get symptoms that can be easily mistaken for razor burn, pimples, bug bites, jock itch, hemorrhoids, an ingrown hair, or a vaginal yeast infection.

After you're infected, the symptoms go away, but can flare up from time to time. Luckily, the first outbreak usually is the worst. And some people may have just one or two outbreaks in their lifetime.

Is there a test for genital herpes?

Yes. A doctor can take a sample from what appears to be a herpes sore and examine it under a microscope. You can also have a blood test. The blood test looks for antibodies to the virus that your immune system would have made when you were infected. HSV-2 almost always infects the genitals, so if antibodies to HSV-2 are detected in your blood, you probably have genital herpes.

A blood test that shows antibodies to HSV-1 means you could have genital or oral herpes. That's because oral herpes, typically caused by HSV-1, can be spread to the genitals during oral sex.

If I don't have it now, how can I avoid it in the future?

The only sure-fire way to avoid getting genital herpes is to abstain from sex or have sex only with someone who is also herpes-free. Short of that, a latex condom offers some protection if it covers the infected area. Remember, you can get genital herpes by receiving oral sex (fellatio, cunnilingus, anilingus) from someone with a cold sore on the

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mouth. Likewise, you can get oral herpes from someone's genitals by way of oral sex.

If you know that a sex partner has genital herpes, you can reduce your risk by having sex (vaginal, anal, or oral intercourse) only when he or she has no symptoms. Nevertheless, genital herpes can be contagious even when there are no visible symptoms, so you should always use a latex barrier, such as a condom or a dental dam.

What's the big deal? Can genital herpes kill you?

It's not life threatening in and of itself. But having herpes sores makes it easier for HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, to enter your body. Not only is there an increased risk for getting HIV if you have genital herpes, but having the two diseases together may also make each one worse.

A pregnant woman can pass genital herpes on to her baby, so it's particularly serious during pregnancy. If you get infected near the end of pregnancy, the risk is highest. At least 30% and as many as 50% of newly infected pregnant women give the virus to their babies. For moms who were infected long before delivery, the risk is much lower. Less than 1% of babies born to mothers with an older genital herpes infection get the virus. And if a woman has an outbreak at delivery, a cesarean deliver is usually done.

You may have heard that genital herpes causes cervical cancer. That's not exactly true. It may be a factor, but it's not the main cause.

Genital herpes is a lifelong condition for which there is no cure. Having it can force you to make inconvenient changes in your life, particularly in your sex life, and it can cause you a lot of pain and discomfort. You simply would rather not have it.

To learn more, check out [Tests for Diagnosis](#) to learn how your doctor can determine if you have genital herpes.

Also, find out about the Common [Symptoms](#) you should watch for.

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

Reviewed by [Cynthia Haines](#), MD.
Published March 2005.

SOURCES: Fleming, et al., New England Journal of Medicine, Oct. 16, 1997; vol 337: pp 1105-1111. American Social Health Association. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. MEDLINEplus Medical Encyclopedia. CDC. WebMD Medical News: "Herpes Virus Linked to Cervical Cancer."

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Preparing for Your Doctor Visit

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Print out this page and take it with you to your appointment. These illustrations will help you follow the discussion with your health care provider.

Also, your doctor may ask you these questions during your office visit. Take the time to go over them now, so you can get the most out of the time you spend in the exam room.

- Do you get cold sores?
- Have you had sores or rashes anywhere between your waist and mid-thigh?
- Do you have such symptoms now, and if so, when did they appear?
- When did you last have sex?
- What areas might have been exposed to the virus (for example, the penis, vagina, or anus) during sexual activity?
- How many sex partners have you had in your lifetime?
- Have you ever had sex with someone you knew had genital herpes?
- Have you had sex with a new partner within the past month?
- Do you always use condoms?

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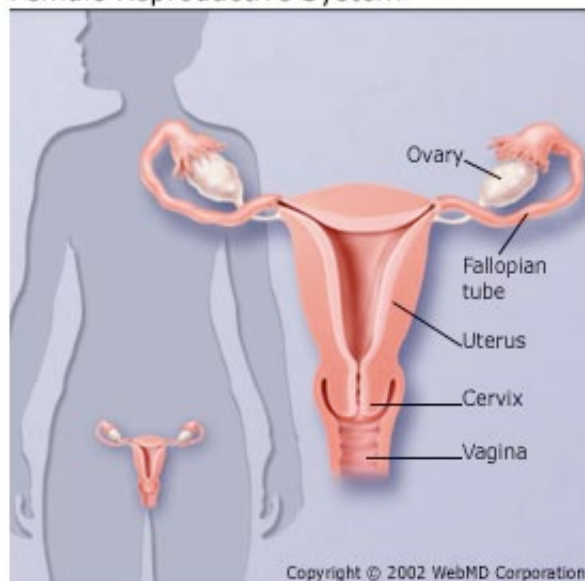
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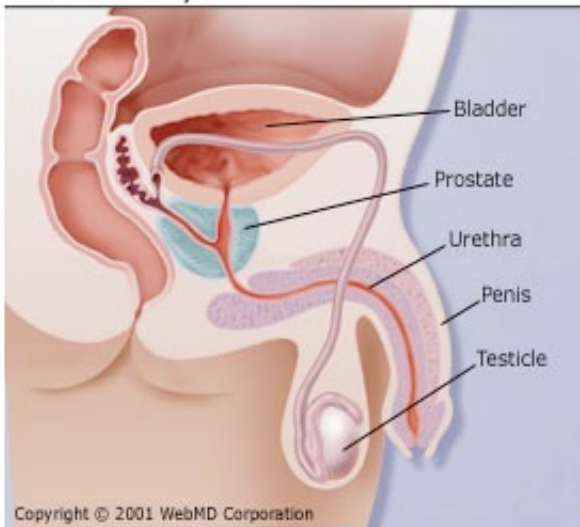
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Female Reproductive System



Male Anatomy



We often forget all the questions we want to ask once we're in the exam room. Before this visit, print out and take along [10 Questions to Ask Your Doctor](#).

Also, check out the answers to common queries in our [FAQ -- How Can You Tell If You Have It?](#)

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

Reviewed by [Cynthia Haines](#), MD.
Published March 2005.

SOURCES: CDC.

Newly Diagnosed with **Genital Herpes**

10 Questions to Ask Your Doctor

Genital herpes raises lots of questions, whether you've just found out you have it, are trying to manage outbreaks, or have a partner who has it. To help you get the answers you need, here are the most important questions you'll want to ask your doctor.

If You Are Newly Diagnosed

- What type of herpes virus do I have?
- How long have I been infected?
- Should I be tested for other sexually transmitted diseases?
- How can I keep my partner from becoming infected?
- How soon should my partner be tested?
- How often can I expect to have symptoms? How will they affect my daily life?
- Should I start taking medication? If not now, when should I consider it?
- Will herpes complicate any other health problems I have?
- Can I still plan to have children?
- Can you recommend a support group or a counselor to help me deal with my diagnosis?

If You Are Living With Outbreaks

- Would I benefit from taking herpes suppression drugs every day, or should I take medication only when I have flare-ups?
- Which drug would be the best choice for me, and why?
- What are the possible side effects?
- What should I do if my medication causes problems or doesn't work well?
- Is there anything else I can use to relieve my symptoms?
- What can trigger outbreaks? Can I make lifestyle changes to help prevent them?
- How often should my long-term partner be tested? How soon should a new partner wait to have a test?
- What should I do if I want to have children?
- Should I join a clinical trial for an experimental therapy?
- Can you recommend a support group or a counselor to help me work through this?

If Your Partner Has Herpes

- If I have been infected, how long would it take for the virus to show up in tests?
- Is it possible to have a "false negative" test result? How can I be sure that my test result is accurate?
- Should I be tested for other sexually transmitted diseases?
- How likely am I to be infected by my partner? What can we do to reduce the risk?
- If I keep having sex with my partner, how often should I be tested?
- If I become infected, would my partner and I have to change our sexual routine?
- What symptoms should I watch for?
- Can I still plan to have children with my partner?
- What can I do to help my partner manage the condition?
- Can you recommend a support group or a counselor to help me come to terms with this?

In addition to the questions above, get the most out of your doctor visit by learning [how to prepare](#).

Start Here

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- [How Do I Know I Have It?](#)
- [What Is the Treatment?](#)
- [10 Questions to Ask Your Doctor](#)

Learn More

- [Get the Sex & Relationships Newsletter](#)

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

Reviewed by [Brunilda Nazario, MD](#).

Published March 2005.

SOURCES: The Center for Disease Prevention and Control, "Sexually Transmitted Diseases Treatment Guidelines 2002": pp 12-18. Terri Warren, RN, Westover Heights Clinic.

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Tests for Diagnosis

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Accurate testing is important for genital herpes. Being told you're infected when you're not, or the other way around, can be awful. Some people have lived decades under the false impression that they were infected because a doctor didn't test them for the virus. Instead, they were diagnosed by their symptoms alone. It's easy to mistake genital herpes symptoms for something else.

If you have sores on your genitals, a doctor can take a sample from a sore and look for the herpes simplex virus (HSV) in it. One test is called a cell culture. Any viruses in the sample are allowed to multiply so that they're easy to find under a microscope.

The direct fluorescent antibody test is another kind. A solution containing HSV antibodies and a fluorescent dye is added to the sample. Antibodies are proteins produced by the immune system in response to an infection. If the virus is present in the sample, the antibodies stick to it and glow when viewed under a special microscope.

These tests are good because they can tell the difference between the two types of HSV. It's important to know which type you have. If you're infected with type 2 (HSV-2), you may have outbreaks more often than would if you had type 1 (HSV-1). What's more, knowing which type you have gives a clue as to how you were infected. HSV-1 usually infects the genitals through oral sex, and HSV-2 usually is passed on during vaginal or anal sex. For help with these terms, see the Glossary.

These tests may give a false-negative result if the sores have begun healing, or if it's not the first time you've had symptoms. A positive result from one of these tests is very accurate, however.

Blood Tests for Genital Herpes

A blood test can detect HSV antibodies even when you have no symptoms. A false-negative result from a blood test is possible if you have been infected recently. It takes several weeks for HSV antibodies to show up in the blood.

False-positive test results are possible, too. If you test positive, but your risk for getting the virus is low, you may need to be tested again.

Tzanck and PCR Tests

Other ways to detect the herpes virus include the Tzanck test and the PCR test. A Tzanck test places a sample from a sore on a microscope slide and stains it with a dye. Cells that are infected with HSV look different from those that aren't. This test is not very accurate, so health experts don't recommend it.

The PCR (polymerase chain reaction) test looks for pieces of the virus' DNA. It's an accurate test, but doctors have not decided how it should be used to diagnose genital herpes, so it's not the preferred method.

New tests on the horizon include one that can detect HSV in saliva and urine. It was developed recently by a doctor at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine for use in a safe-sex study in Africa. The test has not been marketed to the public.

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Before you visit your health provider to be tested for genital herpes, first read [Preparing for Your Doctor Visit](#). To get the most out of your exam, print and take along [10 Questions to Ask Your Doctor](#).

If you are diagnosed with herpes, you have many decisions to make. Do you want to take medication? Which one? Should you take medicine every day or only when you have symptoms? To better understand your choices, see Treatment Options and this helpful chart, [Medications Chart](#).

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

Reviewed by [Cynthia Haines, MD](#).

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SOURCES: CDC. MEDLINEplus Medical Encyclopedia. The Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy. Reuters Health. Terri Warren, RN.

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Coping With Diagnosis

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You have been told you're infected with a virus for which there is no cure, and one that affects a very sensitive area. That's crummy news but don't get too down about it.

Above all, realize that genital herpes is very common. Chances are one of your friends, family members, or co-workers has it, too. If you have read about genital herpes, you know the statistic: About one in five people in the U.S. is infected. But you may not realize that some diseases we consider quite common are less so than genital herpes, asthma and diabetes, for instance.

If you've done your herpes homework, you also know it won't kill you, and it probably will not cause serious health problems later. Still, no one should underestimate the havoc the diagnosis can play with your emotions. You may feel "dirty" or sexually undesirable. You may get depressed thinking about a lifetime of symptoms and taking drugs to control them. You may be angry with the person who infected you. These are valid feelings, but you must learn to overcome them and get back to normal, or else you risk becoming your herpes. You are not herpes: You have herpes.

Challenge Your Feelings About Genital Herpes

The way to get over these feelings is to challenge the assumptions on which they are based. Does genital herpes make you less attractive? No, not really. Sores may appear on your genitals from time to time but the rest of you is not affected. People are attracted to many things about you besides your sex appeal. You're just as cute and funny as you always were; your eyes are still as alluring, or whatever is special about you.

When you have symptoms, you shouldn't have sex, and probably won't want to. But then you don't feel sexy when you have a cold, either. After a few days, you get over your cold and feel better. Think back to a time when you were sick with a cold. Your partner may have leaned in to kiss you, and you said something like, "No, I don't want to give you this bug I have." But did he or she kiss you anyway? If someone wants you, your infection won't necessarily deter desire.

Coping Day to Day

You may have to make some changes in your daily life, which will feel strange at first. But will life change dramatically? Probably not. You can keep moving ahead in your career, have children, and have fun.

You may need to take medication, but pills are a reality of modern life. Millions of people take pills every day to treat health problems, and many more take vitamins and supplements every day because they want to. As much as you value a carefree lifestyle, you have always done some necessary chores every day, like brushing your teeth. Taking your medicine will become as routine as that.

You may not even have to take daily medication. You may need it only when you have a flare-up, and that's like taking antibiotics for a bout of bronchitis. Also, remember that symptoms tend to calm down in time. Your first outbreak may be the worst you'll ever have.

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Dealing With Anger About Having Herpes

Then, ask yourself: Did the person from whom I got genital herpes want to infect me? Again, probably not. Most people with genital herpes don't know they're infected. Unless that person knew, and neglected to tell you, there's no reason for anger. In any case, having sex means you accept the risk of getting a sexually transmitted disease. Don't beat yourself up, or anyone else, because you didn't fully understand the risk.

These are only a few of the personal issues you may face in dealing with your diagnosis. There's also the hard task of telling your partner, the thorny issues involved in dating, and the things you should and shouldn't do when you have sex.

You don't have to deal with all this on your own. If you feel uncomfortable talking about your feelings with people you know, you can hash things over with others who have herpes, in either an online or in-person support group. Be assured that you're not the only person with the kinds of problems you have. A counselor or therapist can also help you resolve your problems.

For more guidance about talking with others about herpes, see [How to Tell Your Partner](#).

You may also find help by clicking on [Re-Entering the Dating Scene](#) and [Your Sex Life](#).

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

Reviewed by [Cynthia Haines, MD](#).
Published March 2005.

SOURCES: Fleming, et al. "Herpes Simplex Virus Type 2 in the United States, 1976 to 1994," *New England Journal of Medicine*, Oct. 16, 1997; vol 337: pp 1105-1111. Terri Warren, RN, Westover Heights Clinic. Warren, Terri, RN, and Warren, Ricks, PhD, *The Updated Herpes Handbook*. Portland Press, 2002.

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FAQ - About Your Diagnosis

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You may ask these common questions when you've just found out you have genital herpes. Find some answers below.

If I continue to have sex, will I infect my partner?

It's certainly possible. You can reduce the risk to your partner by having sex only when you have no symptoms. However, the virus can still be contagious without any noticeable symptoms such as sores or a rash on the skin. That's why you should always use a latex condom. A condom does not completely eliminate the risk, because it may not cover an affected area, but it does offer some protection.

Taking antiviral medications acyclovir (Zovirax), Valtrex, and Famvir can make symptoms appear less often and make them less severe. There is some evidence that these drugs also may protect against transmission.

Is there any way to get rid of the virus?

There is no cure for genital herpes. Unless scientists find one in the future, you will always have the virus. But taking antiviral drugs can help manage your condition. Ask your doctor about treatment options.

How serious is my condition?

Genital herpes can be painful, inconvenient, and upsetting, but it's not considered a life-threatening condition. Even so, it may increase your risk of getting HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, because the sores are prime spots for HIV to get into your body. What's more, being infected with HIV and the herpes virus may make both diseases worse.

A pregnant woman can pass genital herpes on to her baby, so it's particularly serious during pregnancy. If you get infected near the end of pregnancy, the risk is highest. At least 30% and as many as 50% of newly infected pregnant women give the virus to their babies. For moms who were infected long before delivery, the risk is much lower. Less than 1% of babies born to mothers with an older genital herpes infection get the virus. Also, doctors usually will perform a cesarean section if a woman is having an outbreak at the time of delivery.

You may have heard that genital herpes causes cervical cancer. That's not exactly true. It may be a factor, but it's not the main cause.

How often will I have symptoms?

That depends on the type of herpes virus you have. After being infected, people with herpes simplex virus-1 (HSV-1) tend to have far fewer and less severe outbreaks than those infected with herpes simplex virus-2 (HSV-2). Both types can cause genital herpes. Many people never have symptoms, and don't even know they are infected.

In those who do have symptoms, how often they will appear and how long they will last varies greatly from person to person. Stress, illness, menstruation, and various other things can trigger a flare-up.

What should I tell my partner?

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You should tell any sex partner that you have genital herpes. It's important to learn all you can about genital herpes and share that information. Then you and your partner can make an informed decision about sex. Tell a partner that there is always a chance of getting the virus from you, but that there are ways to reduce the risk, such as using latex condoms and avoiding sex when you have symptoms.

There are plenty of reasons why you should communicate openly. Your partner may have infected you, and he or she should know. It may also help your relationship in the long run. Your partner is likely to appreciate your honesty.

When breaking the news, explain how common genital herpes is: About one in five adults in the U.S. are infected. You can say it's like having cold sores on the mouth (which 50% to 80% of all adults in the U.S. have), except the virus has infected your genitals. It will also help if you're calm when talking to your partner and approach the discussion with a positive attitude: "I think we can work this out so that we'll both be happy," not, "This will probably tear us apart, but...."

If you were sexually intimate with your partner before you were diagnosed, he or she should be tested for the virus.

Where can I find support?

Many resources are available for people living with genital herpes. A good place to start is the CDC National STD/HIV Hotline: 1-800-227-8922. Also, talk to your doctor about any concerns you have.

Learn more about [Treatment Options](#). Also, check out this [Medications Chart](#) to understand the drug you take and its effects. Read more about [HIV and herpes](#) and [herpes and pregnancy](#)

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

Reviewed by [Cynthia Haines, MD](#).
Published March 2005.

SOURCES: Fleming, et al. New England Journal of Medicine; October 16, 1997. Vol 337:1105-1111. American Social Health Association. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. MEDLINEplus Medical Encyclopedia. CDC. WebMD Medical News: "Herpes Virus Linked to Cervical Cancer." Warren, T., Warren, R. The Updated Herpes Handbook., 2002, pp. 23-24. WebMD Medical News: "Genital Herpes Treatment Cuts Spread."

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Treatment Options

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Treatment with antiviral drugs can help people who are bothered by genital herpes outbreaks stay symptom-free longer. These drugs can also reduce the severity and duration of symptoms when they flare up. Drug therapy is not a cure, but it can make living with the condition easier.

There are three drugs commonly used to treat genital herpes symptoms: Zovirax, Famvir, and Valtrex. These are all taken in pill form. Severe cases may be treated with intravenous (IV) Zovirax.

Formulas applied to the surface of the skin provide little benefit, and doctors don't usually recommend them.

When Treatments for Genital Herpes Are Given

- **Initial treatment.** If you have symptoms such as sores when you're first diagnosed with genital herpes, your doctor should give you a brief course (seven to 10 days) of antiviral therapy to relieve them or prevent them from getting worse. Your doctor may keep you on the drugs longer if your sores don't heal in that time.

After the first treatment, work with your doctor to come up with the best way to take antiviral therapies. There are two options:

- **Intermittent treatment.** Your doctor may prescribe an antiviral drug for you to keep on hand in case you have another flare-up; this is called intermittent therapy. You can take the pills for three to five days as soon as you notice sores or when you feel an outbreak coming on. Sores will heal and disappear on their own, but taking the drugs can make the symptoms less severe and make them go away faster.
- **Suppressive treatment.** If you have outbreaks often, you may want to consider taking an antiviral drug every day. Doctors call this suppressive therapy. For someone who has more than six outbreaks a year, suppressive therapy reduces the number of outbreaks by 70% to 80%. Many people who take the antiviral drugs daily have no outbreaks at all.

There is no set number of outbreaks per year that doctors use to decide when someone should start suppressive therapy. Rather, more important factors are how often the outbreaks happen and if they are severe enough to interfere with your life.

Taking daily suppressive therapy may also reduce the risk of transmitting the virus to a sex partner. Antiviral drugs reduce viral shedding, when the virus makes new copies of itself on the skin's surface.

A recent study of people taking daily doses of Valtrex shows the drug may help protect sex partners from being infected, although you should still use a condom. Half the partners of people taking daily Valtrex became infected with the virus, and half did not. Moreover, 75% of the partners did not show any symptoms of genital herpes, even if they had acquired the virus.

Side Effects and Follow-up Care

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Side effects with these drugs are considered mild, and health experts believe these drugs are safe in the long term. Zovirax is the oldest of the three, and its safety has been documented in people taking suppressive therapy for several years.

People taking suppressive therapy should see their doctor at least once a year to decide if they should continue. You may find taking the pills every day to be inconvenient, the drugs may not work for you, or you may naturally have fewer outbreaks as time goes on. Your doctor can help you make treatment choices to suit your needs.

To learn more about specific medications, see [Medications Chart](#). You can also explore some [alternative therapies](#), and read about [new drugs in development](#).

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

Reviewed by [Cynthia Haines, MD](#).
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Medications Chart

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Currently there is no cure for genital herpes. The good news is that some drugs have been effective in reducing the duration and frequency of herpes outbreaks. The decision to use one treatment over another for genital herpes depends on many factors that must be discussed with your health care provider:

1. Have you had a previous outbreak?

The first episode of genital herpes is usually the worst and often has other symptoms like fever and fatigue. Recurrent outbreaks aren't usually as painful and don't last as long.

2. How frequent are the outbreaks?

People who have frequent outbreaks should consider suppressive therapy (daily medication) to reduce the number of outbreaks of the disease.

3. What is the status of your immune system?

People with genital herpes who have HIV/AIDS, organ transplantation, leukemia or are on long term immune system suppressing drugs are at risk for more severe herpes infections. Elderly people also often have a weakened immune system and should discuss treatment options with their health care provider.

4. Are you pregnant?

Women who have a herpes outbreak during

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Drug	Side Effects You May Have...	Could Cause Problems for...	Tell Your Doctor if You're Taking...
acyclovir (Zovirax)	stomach upset loss of appetite nausea vomiting diarrhea headache dizziness weakness	people with kidney disease pregnant or nursing women	probenecid
famciclovir (Famvir)	headache nausea diarrhea fatigue	people with kidney disease pregnant or nursing women	probenecid
valacyclovir (Valtrex)	nausea vomiting headache loss of appetite	people with kidney disease pregnant or nursing women	cimetidine probenecid

weakness stomach pain dizziness	the elderly
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To learn how you can care for yourself at home and about alternative remedies, see [Alternative Treatments](#).

To learn more about future medications for genital herpes, see [New Treatments in the Pipeline](#).

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

Reviewed by [Cynthia Haines, MD](#).

Published March 2005.

SOURCES: CDC. "Sexually Transmitted Diseases Treatment Guidelines 2002." pp. 13-15
<http://www.cdc.gov/std/treatment/default.htm>

Medscape.com

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Alternative Treatments

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A number of alternative (also called complementary) therapies can help you deal with any outbreaks of genital herpes.

Home Care Measures

First, simple self-care may be enough to relieve most discomfort caused by genital herpes. Taking an over-the-counter pain reliever, such as aspirin, acetaminophen, or ibuprofen, can help ease the pain of herpes symptoms. Doctors sometimes recommend soaking the affected area in warm water. But the area should be kept dry most of the time. If toweling off after bathing is uncomfortable, try using a hair dryer. Then put on cotton underwear. Cotton absorbs moisture better than synthetic fabric does.

Herbs, Supplements, and More

Scientists have studied herbal extracts and nutritional supplements based on some herpes patients' claims that they help relieve symptoms. Some study results have been promising, others discouraging.

Many people say that an extract of the echinacea plant helps boost the immune system's ability to fight infection. Some say it decreases the frequency and severity of genital herpes outbreaks. Researchers in the U.K. compared the effect of echinacea with that of a placebo. They gave echinacea to 50 people with genital herpes for six months and a placebo for another six months. There was no significant difference in the number of herpes outbreaks during the two periods.

Another study showed that an ointment containing propolis, a waxy substance that honeybees make, may help herpes sores heal. Sores healed faster for people using the propolis ointment than in those using ointments containing the antiviral drug acyclovir or a placebo. The ointment was applied to herpes sores four times a day. After 10 days, 24 of the 30 people using propolis ointment said their sores healed, compared with 14 of the 30 people using acyclovir ointment and 12 of the 30 using a placebo.

Researchers have also found that the herb *Prunella vulgaris*, and an edible mushroom, *Rozites caperata* (the "gypsy mushroom"), contain chemicals that fight both HSV-1 and HSV-2.

These treatments have not been approved for treating genital herpes by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. You can buy them in stores, but they are considered nutritional supplements, not drugs, so they are not subjected to the same quality standards that FDA-approved drugs are.

For information about available medications, see the [Medications Chart](#).

To learn more about your care in the future, see [New Treatments in the Pipeline](#).

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

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SOURCES: Terri Warren, RN, and Ricks Warren, PhD, *The Updated Herpes Handbook*, Portland Press, 2002. Vonau, B. "Does the extract of the plant *Echinacea purpurea* influence the clinical course of recurrent genital herpes?" *International Journal of STD and AIDS*, March 2001; vol 3: pp 154-158. Vynograd, N. "A comparative multi-centre study of the efficacy of propolis, acyclovir and placebo in the treatment of genital herpes (HSV)," *Phytomedicine*, March 2000; vol 7: pp 1-6. Chiu, LC. "A polysaccharide fraction from medicinal herb *Prunella vulgaris* downregulates the expression of herpes simplex virus antigen in Vero cells." *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, July 2004; vol 93: pp 63-68. Xu, HX. "Isolation and characterization of an anti-HSV polysaccharide from *Prunella vulgaris*," *Antiviral Research*, Oct. 1999; vol 44: pp 43-54. Piraino, F. "Isolation and partial characterization of an antiviral, RC-183, from the edible mushroom *Rozites caperata*," *Antiviral Research*, Sept. 1999; vol 43: pp 67-78.

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New Treatments in the Pipeline

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Researchers are hard at work on new treatments to fight genital herpes. Everyone wants a vaccine but only one still in experimental stages has shown promise. In 2000, researchers reported this vaccine protected women who had never been infected with a herpes virus from getting HSV-2. But the vaccine didn't protect women who were already infected with HSV-1, and it offered no protection for men.

Microbicides are another option scientists are exploring in the search for new genital herpes treatments. Microbicides are chemicals that protect against infection by killing microbes (small organisms such as bacteria and viruses) before they enter the body. One that has made some progress is called BufferGel, which would be applied to the vagina. Studies show it's able to kill herpes, as well as some other sexually transmitted viruses.

Scientists also are working on new drugs that keep the herpes virus from replicating. To replicate (make copies of itself), a virus has to duplicate its DNA exactly. Scientists hope these new drugs will prevent the virus from doing that.

Clinical Trials: Key to Ongoing Research

Although these new treatments are just on the horizon, it may be years before any are available to consumers.

The process of introducing a new treatment to the public can be a long one. Before the FDA approves a drug, it must go through rigorous clinical trials, which are divided into three phases. In phase I, researchers try to find out if the drug is safe for people to take. If the drug is deemed safe, it may go on to phase II, when researchers aim to determine if the drug works as it should. They also collect more safety data. In phase III trials, they expand their research to include more patients in more places.

To conduct a clinical trial, scientists need people to participate voluntarily. Clinical trials often involve thousands of patients who volunteer to take the experimental drug. The FDA and an independent review board carefully monitor every aspect of the trial. There are rules the researchers must follow to ensure that their work is not only scientifically correct, but also ethically sound. The study volunteers have clearly defined rights, such as the right to drop out of the trial at any time.

While there are risks involved in joining a clinical trial, there may be benefits, too. You might get a new "wonder drug" long before it hits the market. If you're interested, ask your doctor if you could benefit by joining one. Your doctor may know of a trial that is seeking volunteers in your area. The National Institutes of Health also has an online database that you can search: www.clinicaltrials.gov. This web site provides detailed information on what's involved in joining a clinical trial.

Genital herpes is a lifelong condition. For help coping with herpes day to day, see [5 Ways to Ease Stress and Stay Healthy](#).

For emotional support, see [How to Tell Your Partner](#) and [Re-Entering the Dating Scene](#).

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the

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[Glossary](#).

Reviewed by [Cynthia Haines, MD](#).

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SOURCES: WebMD Medical News: "A New Way to Rein in Sexually Transmitted Disease." WebMD Medical News: "New Herpes Vaccine Affects Women Only." Kleymann, G. Nature Medicine. April 8, 2002; vol 4: pp 392-398. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. National Institutes of Health.

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If You Have or Are at Risk for HIV

WebMD Medical Reference created by WebMD Editorial

Having genital herpes can increase the risk of being infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, and it can cause serious problems for people living with HIV.

People who have genital herpes sores are more likely to be infected with HIV during intercourse. When you develop a sore, your immune system tries to heal it, so there are many immune cells concentrated in that spot. Those are the cells that HIV infects. If HIV in semen, vaginal fluid, or blood comes in contact with a herpes sore, the risk for infection is high.

The Compound Effect of Genital Herpes and HIV

HIV and the herpes virus are a troublesome duo. One can worsen the effects of the other. Research shows that when the herpes virus is active, it may cause HIV to make more copies of itself (the process called replication) than it would otherwise. The more HIV replicates, the more of the body's infection-fighting cells it destroys, eventually leading to AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome).

People infected with both HIV and the herpes virus may have longer-lasting, more frequent, and more severe outbreaks of herpes symptoms, because a weakened immune system can't keep the herpes virus under control as well as a healthy immune system can.

Treatment Issues

It's more difficult to treat genital herpes if you also have HIV. Higher doses of antiviral drugs are often needed to treat herpes in people with HIV. Also, many people with HIV have strains of the herpes virus that are resistant to treatment with the standard antiviral drugs.

If you take antiviral drugs for genital herpes and the treatment isn't working, your doctor can test the virus you have for resistance. If the virus is resistant, there are other possible treatment alternatives, including the drugs Foscavir and Vistide. These drugs can be given through an IV, or a Vistide gel can be applied to the herpes sores.

If you have HIV, ask your doctor if you should be tested for genital herpes. If you already know that you have herpes and HIV, discuss treatment options with your doctor.

For more information, see [Common Symptoms](#).

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

Reviewed by [Cynthia Haines, MD](#).
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SOURCES: Center for HIV Information, University of California San Francisco. CDC.

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If You're Pregnant

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Pregnant women with genital herpes should be careful about passing the virus on to the baby, but not overly worried about it.

A mother can infect her baby during delivery, often fatally. But if a woman had genital herpes before getting pregnant, or if she is first infected early in pregnancy, the chance that her baby will be infected is very low -- less than 1%. Women with genital herpes are examined carefully for any symptoms before giving birth. If sores or signs that an outbreak is coming show up at the time of delivery, the baby may be delivered by cesarean section (also called a C-section).

The risk of infecting the baby is high (30% to 50%) when a woman is newly infected late in pregnancy, however. That's because the mother's immune system has not developed protective antibodies against the virus. Women with an older herpes infection have antibodies against the virus, which help protect the baby. If you are pregnant and you think you may have been infected recently, tell your doctor right away.

Ways to Avoid Risks of Getting Herpes While Pregnant

Women who don't have genital herpes should be careful about sex during the third trimester. Unless you know for sure that your partner is herpes free, you should avoid sex altogether during the third trimester. If your partner gets cold sores (oral herpes), he or she should not perform oral sex on you during this time.

Some doctors think all women should be tested for herpes when they get pregnant, especially if their sex partners have herpes. Ask your doctor if you or your partner should be tested.

Treatment Issues

Women taking antiviral drugs for herpes -- either daily suppressive therapy or occasional therapy for outbreaks -- should consult their doctor about whether to take the drugs during pregnancy. The answer is not set in stone: You and your doctor have to discuss the risks and benefits to decide what's right for you.

Herpes infection in a newborn is also serious. Do not allow anyone with a cold sore on the mouth to kiss the baby. If you have a cold sore, don't kiss the baby, and wash your hands with soap and water before touching the baby.

For more information, see [Common Symptoms](#).

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

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SOURCES: CDC. Warren, T., Warren, R. The Updated Herpes Handbook, 2002; p. 21.

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5 Ways to Ease Stress and Stay Healthy

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Managing stress in healthy ways may help reduce how often you have a genital herpes outbreak. Ongoing stress lasting more than a week seems to trigger genital herpes outbreaks more than any other lifestyle factor.

Here are five steps you can take to manage stress better:

1. **Get enough sleep.** The more rested you are, the better you will be able to handle stress in your life. Most people need about eight hours of sleep every night to function normally. Some need less than that, others need more. Note how long you sleep when you don't set an alarm clock. If, for example, you go to sleep at 11 p.m. and wake up naturally and feeling well rested at 8 a.m., you probably need at least nine hours every night.
2. **Balance your diet.** Make sure your diet includes all the nutrients your body needs to keep you going strong. Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, and limit the amount of sugary and fatty foods and soft drinks you consume. Also cut back on caffeine and alcohol if you tend to overindulge in those.
3. **Exercise.** Physical activity is a great stress reliever. Do something that you enjoy, so that it doesn't seem like a chore. For motivation, include a friend. That could mean playing a sport such as tennis, or having a partner to exercise with at the gym or walk or jog with.
4. **Reach out.** When you're stressed, sometimes the last thing you want to do is socialize. But being with people and having fun can help you forget your troubles for a while. It's not healthy to dwell on them every minute. It's also good to talk about your problems with someone who cares about you and whom you can trust -- a friend, a family member, a spouse, or even a therapist.
5. **Relax.** In addition to all the above, a few minutes of down time does a lot of good. You've probably heard about relaxation techniques, such as yoga or electronic biofeedback, but you don't have to do those things if listening to music, knitting, or just staring out the window is your idea of a relaxing break.

Although persistent stress may lead to outbreaks, the little stressful events and annoyances you face in your daily life do not appear to be stressful enough to trigger genital herpes symptoms.

Other Triggers to Consider

Keep these other triggers in mind. Some may cause your genital herpes to flare-up, others not.

- **Factors during sex.** Some people find that the friction of sexual intercourse irritates the skin and brings on symptoms. Using a water-based lubricant can help reduce irritation. Don't use one that contains the spermicide nonoxynol-9, however. Nonoxynol-9 can irritate mucous membranes, such as the lining of the vagina. Oil-based lubricants are a no-no, too. They weaken latex, making condoms more likely to break. Even if the friction of intercourse seems to be a trigger for your symptoms, it probably won't cause a flare-up every time you have sex.
- **Colds and sunlight.** The common cold and sunlight seem to trigger outbreaks of oral herpes (cold sores), but no proof exists that they trigger genital herpes outbreaks.
- **Hormones.** Hormonal changes, like those that occur in the menstrual cycle, can affect genital herpes outbreaks. No one knows why yet.

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- **Surgery, weak immune system.** Trauma to the body, such as having surgery, may make herpes symptoms appear. It's possible that having a weakened immune system does, too. People whose immune systems are weakened by HIV, for example, tend to have outbreaks more often than people with normal immune functioning do.

Remember that triggers may not be the same for everyone, and doctors are not certain how much lifestyle has to with outbreaks of herpes symptoms. If you think one triggers your symptoms, ask your doctor what you should do about it.

For more guidance about relieving emotional stress, see [How To Tell Your Partner](#) or [What to Do if Your Partner Has Herpes](#).

You may also find reassurance by clicking on [Re-Entering the Dating Scene](#) and [Sex and Herpes](#).

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

Reviewed by [Cynthia Haines, MD](#).

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SOURCES: The American Social Health Association: National Herpes Resource Center. Terri Warren, RN, Westover Heights Clinic, Portland, Ore. Joanne Grosshans, manager, Herpes Resource Center, American Social Health Association. MELINEplus Medical Encyclopedia. "Stress management" and "Herpes labialis (oral Herpes simplex)." Cohen, F., et al. "Persistent Stress as a Predictor of Genital Herpes Recurrence." Archives of Internal Medicine," Nov. 8, 1999; vol 159: pp 2430-2436.

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10 Ways to Reduce Your Risk

WebMD Medical Reference created by WebMD Editorial
Reviewed by [Charlotte E. Grayson](#), MD

1. Use a condom every time you have sex.

A condom may protect you from the herpes virus if it covers the infected area.

2. Ask your partner if he or she has ever had a sexually transmitted disease.

Most people who have genital herpes don't know they're infected, so ask whether he or she has had any other sexually transmitted disease. People with a history of STDs are more likely to have genital herpes.

It may be awkward, but it's important to be honest with each other. Your partner may be afraid to tell you the truth if he or she fears a negative reaction. If your partner feels comfortable talking with you, you'll be more likely to get straight answers.

3. Ask your partner about his or her sexual history.

Someone who has had many sexual partners is more likely to be infected with the herpes virus.

4. Limit the number of sexual partners you have.

The fewer sexual partners you have in your lifetime, the less likely you are to be exposed to the herpes virus.

5. Don't have sex with a partner who has sores on his or her genitals.

If you know your partner has genital herpes, always abstain from sex when symptoms are present. Or, if you see a sore on someone's genitals, don't have sex with that person until you're sure he or she doesn't have genital herpes. Remember, not everyone with genital herpes has symptoms, and herpes sores can be very hard to spot.

6. Don't receive oral sex from somebody with a cold sore.

Oral herpes, which causes sores on the mouth (known as cold sores or fever blisters), can be passed to the genitals through oral sex.

7. Ask your partner to be tested.

If you think your partner is at high risk for genital herpes, you may consider asking him or her to be tested. In that case, you should be tested, too.

8. Don't have sex while intoxicated.

Alcohol and illicit drugs lower inhibitions and impair judgment. People tend to be less careful about practicing safer sex while intoxicated and they often regret it later.

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9. Abstain from sex until you have a life-long monogamous partner.

The only way to be 100% certain you won't get a sexually transmitted disease is to have just one sex partner who has no STDs -- and only if both of you stay monogamous for life.

10. Try alternate forms of sexual intimacy.

If you don't want to be monogamous or totally celibate until you find a life partner, you could greatly reduce your risk of getting a sexually transmitted disease by doing things that don't involve genital-genital contact or oral-genital contact, such as mutual masturbation.

If you're involved with someone who is already infected, check out [Frequently Asked Questions ...If Your Partner Has Genital Herpes](#).

To learn more, don't forget to read [The Basics](#).

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

Reviewed by [Cynthia Haines, MD](#).

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Your Sex Life

WebMD Medical Reference created by WebMD Editorial

You can have a fulfilling sex life if you have genital herpes, even though it may be more complicated than it was before your diagnosis. Now, you must be careful about what you do and when you do it.

Avoid these sexual activities when you have sores on your genitals, or when you feel a herpes outbreak coming on:

- Vaginal sex
- Anal sex
- Receiving oral sex (fellatio, cunnilingus, and anilingus)

Between outbreaks, it's OK to have sex, as long as your partner understands and accepts the risk. He or she can be infected even when you don't have symptoms or sores. To help prevent infecting your partner, always use a latex condom for vaginal sex, anal sex, and receiving fellatio. Condoms are not guaranteed to prevent infection, but research has shown that they provide some protection. Use a dental dam for cunnilingus and anilingus.

As long as you don't have herpes sores on your mouth, you can perform oral sex on your partner at any time, including when you have an outbreak of genital symptoms. Otherwise, use your imagination. There are many ways people can express themselves sexually without having genital-to-genital or mouth-to-genital contact. Exploring them can enrich your sex life and make up for having to avoid other activities because of genital herpes. Consult a health care professional if you have any doubts about what's safe and what is not.

For example, you could try mutual masturbation, which poses almost no risk: You could masturbate together -- side by side, facing each other, or back to back -- or masturbate each other manually. Just make sure you don't have any broken skin on your hands, and wash your hands with soap and warm water afterward. Also, never touch a herpes sore and then touch your partner, and make sure no bodily fluids could be exchanged by accident. If you and your partner like vibrators or dildos, you could try using them on each other. Make sure you wash the toy before and after, and don't share it.

A Drug for Genital Herpes May Be Right for You

You might also consider taking antiviral drug therapy for your herpes to reduce the amount of virus you shed. A recent study shows that daily suppressive therapy (taking a drug daily to sharply reduce the frequency of outbreaks) may help keep your partner from being infected. (You should still use a condom, however, because suppressive therapy was just 50% effective in preventing transmission.)

Daily therapy isn't the only option, or necessarily the best one for you. If your outbreaks are few and far between, you might set your mind at ease by keeping a supply of antiviral pills that you could take in case of a flare-up. Ask your doctor if you could benefit from taking medication for genital herpes.

Another consideration may be that the friction of sex could irritate your skin and trigger outbreaks. If that's a problem for you, try using a water-based sexual lubricant. K-Y jelly and AstroGlide are two brands available at many drugstores. There are more brands available from stores that sell sex toys.

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Don't use an oil-based lubricant, however, because the oil can break down latex. Also, do not use a lubricant containing the spermicide nonoxynol-9. Nonoxynol-9 may cause tiny rips in mucous membranes (such as those on the genitals) that can let viruses like herpes and HIV enter the body more easily.

For more guidance, see these three articles:

- [Re-Entering the Dating Scene](#)
- [How to Tell Your Partner](#)
- [What to Do If Your Partner Has Herpes](#)

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

Reviewed by [Cynthia Haines, MD](#).

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SOURCES: WebMD Medical News: "Genital Herpes Treatment Cuts Spread." CDC. Warren, T. and Warren, R. The Updated Herpes Handbook. Portland Press, 2002. Terri Warren, RN. Joanne Grosshans, manager, Herpes Resource Center, American Social Health Association. American Social Health Association's National Herpes Resource Center.

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Re-Entering the Dating Scene

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Now that you know you have genital herpes, you're out of the dating game, right? Absolutely not. There's no reason to stop looking for love and fun.

Genital herpes doesn't detract from your many desirable qualities, which have drawn people to you in the past and will continue to make you a great catch.

Broaching the Topic of Genital Herpes

The first date after your diagnosis may seem a little strange, however. If you hope to be sexually intimate with your date at some point, you may feel like you're keeping a nasty secret. If you are one to be candid with people, you'll want to blurt it out. Don't. There are some things you should reveal about yourself right away -- for example, that you're married, or that you're just in town for the week -- but some things are better left for the appropriate moment.

It's up to you to decide the right time to tell your date that you have genital herpes. Follow two rules: First, don't wait until after having sex. Second, don't wait until you're just about to have sex -- in which case the attraction may be too strong for either of you to think rationally and act responsibly.

If in the past you tended to start a new relationship with sex, you now might want to change your approach. It might be better to break the news about your herpes to someone who has already grown attached to you. Kissing, cuddling, and fondling is safe, so you don't have to tell before you do that. But use your best judgment as to how physically intimate you want to get before telling. One thing could lead to another, and you might find yourself in an awkward situation.

Dealing With Rejection

Anyone who dates should be prepared for rejection. The person you're seeing may beat a hasty retreat when he or she finds out about your genital herpes. If you get the "I just want to be friends" talk after telling your sweetheart you have herpes, consider this: He or she may have already been looking for a way out, and herpes was as good an excuse as any. What's more, anyone who disdains you or humiliates you for having herpes was never worth your while.

Keep dating, and you will find someone who wants to be with you regardless of your herpes status. There are certainly some who wouldn't mind keeping the intimacy level just short of doing things that could transmit the virus. And of those people, it's likely that at least one will come around, and say, "Hey, I understand there's a risk, but I'm crazy about you, so I'm willing to take it."

Depending on your dating style, you might look for another person who knows he or she has herpes, if only to avoid having to discuss it. If you already use dating services or personal ads, you can also use any of those specifically for people with genital herpes. A search on the Internet for "herpes dating" will turn up several.

For more guidance, see [How to Tell Your Partner](#) or [What to Do If Your Partner Has Herpes](#).

Find more tips for a fulfilling [sex life](#).

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For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

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What to Do if Your Partner Has It

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A partner who has herpes needs your support and acceptance. It took a lot of courage for your partner to tell you, and it means he or she cares about your well-being and values your trust. "No good deed goes unpunished" is often a harsh fact of life. But don't let it be that way in your relationship.

Of course, your feelings and concerns matter, too. If you're uncomfortable with the idea of having sex with your partner again, or becoming sexually intimate for the first time, you're entitled to feel that way.

But instead of declaring the sexual part of your relationship over or out of the question, think of ways you can be intimate without risking infection. You can reduce the risk of becoming infected through sexual intercourse by using condoms and avoiding sex when your partner has symptoms. There will always be some risk, even if you practice safer sex, but you can minimize it as much as possible.

Get Informed About Genital Herpes, and Don't Leap to Conclusions

Educate yourself about genital herpes if your partner has not explained it to your satisfaction. You'll find out that it's not as serious as it may seem, and that people can and do have wonderful relationships with great sex even though one of them has genital herpes.

Sometimes people in long-term relationships suspect that their partner has been cheating when he or she is diagnosed. That's not necessarily true, so don't make that accusation. Your partner could have been infected years or decades before you met.

Also, consider the possibility that you gave your partner herpes. Millions of people live with genital herpes without having a clue that they're infected. In fact, health experts estimate that 90% of those who are infected in the United States don't know it. A herpes infection doesn't always cause obvious sores on the genitals. In many cases, it causes no noticeable symptoms. Health care professionals say that sex partners of people with herpes should be tested.

For more guidance, see [Frequently Asked Questions -- If Your Partner Has Genital Herpes](#).

Read up on genital herpes in [The Basics](#). And if you do decide to get tested, print out and take along [10 Questions to Ask Your Doctor](#).

For more details about continuing an intimate relationship with someone with herpes, see [Your Sex Life](#).

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

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FAQ...If Your Partner Has It

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When you find out your partner has genital herpes, you may be shocked at first and have lots of questions second. Here are some answers to help you.

How likely is it that I've been infected, too?

That depends on whether you have always practiced safe sex, for one thing. Also, it may depend on how long you've been sexually intimate with each other.

If you've had sex only once or twice, and if you used a condom each time, your risk is lower than if you've had unprotected sex for a long time. But you could have been infected during any one encounter.

Don't think you're in the clear because you've never seen herpes sores on your partner's genitals or your own. The symptoms of genital herpes are often subtle and easily mistaken for something else, like bug bites, pimples, razor burn, or hemorrhoids. What's more, the virus can be contagious even when there are no symptoms.

How can I protect myself if we keep having sex?

While no prevention method short of abstinence is 100% effective, using a latex condom offers some protection. Your partner should tell you when symptoms flare up, which is when the virus is most contagious. Avoid sex when your partner has symptoms.

How can I find out if I've been infected?

Go to your doctor and get tested. A doctor may take a sample from what appears to be a genital herpes sore and examine it under a microscope.

You can also have a blood test. The blood test looks for antibodies to the virus that your immune system would have made when you were infected. The second type of herpes simplex virus, HSV-2, almost always infects the genitals, so if antibodies to HSV-2 are detected in your blood, you probably have genital herpes. A blood test that shows antibodies to the other type of herpes virus, HSV-1, means you could have genital or oral herpes. That's because oral herpes, typically caused by HSV-1, can be spread to the genitals during oral sex.

Will my partner have major health problems because of genital herpes?

The biggest impact of genital herpes is usually emotional. Painful symptoms, limitations on sexual activity, and that it's an incurable, lifelong condition can lead to depression. If your partner is pregnant or trying to get pregnant, however, genital herpes is a major concern. Her doctor must be made aware of it. Genital herpes is also more serious for people with HIV and other conditions that weaken the immune system.

You may have heard that genital herpes causes cervical cancer. That's not exactly true. It may be a factor, but it's not the main cause.

What can I do to help my partner?

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For starters, you can understand that having genital herpes isn't all that unusual. If you were to leave your partner to find someone else, you'd have nearly a one-in-five chance of meeting another man with genital herpes, or about a one-in-four chance of meeting another woman who is infected.

If your partner isn't coping well, you may want to suggest joining a support group. If you think genital herpes is harming your relationship, you could try couple's therapy.

Could my partner have picked up genital herpes from a toilet seat or hot tub?

It's very rare, if not impossible, to get genital herpes any other way than by sexual contact.

Keep in mind, however, that many people have genital herpes for years or even decades without knowing it. When they are diagnosed, their monogamous partners often assume they were unfaithful, which may not be true.

For more useful information, check out [10 Ways to Reduce Your Risk](#) and [What to Do if Your Partner Has Herpes](#)

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

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SOURCES: Fleming, et al. "Herpes Simplex Virus Type 2 in the United States, 1976 to 1994," New England Journal of Medicine, Oct. 16, 1997; vol 337: pp 1105-1111. ASHA, National Herpes Resource Center. NIAID (fact sheet), "Genital Herpes," Sept. 2003. MEDLINEplus Medical Encyclopedia: "Herpes genital (genital Herpes simplex)." CDC, "Sexually Transmitted Diseases Treatment Guidelines 2002": pp 12-17. WebMD Medical News: "Herpes Virus Linked to Cervical Cancer," Nov. 5 2002. Terri Warren, RN, Westover Heights Clinic. Warren, Terri, RN, and Warren, Ricks, PhD, The Updated Herpes Handbook. Portland Press, 2002.

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How to Tell Your Partner

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You must tell your partner you have genital herpes. If you pick the right time and say it the right way, there's a good chance things will work out OK.

Think about how you want your partner to take the news. Do you want it to seem like a huge problem? Of course not, so don't present it that way. If you say, "I have some awful news for you," your partner will likely take it as awful news. Instead, be casual, direct and unemotional.

Also avoid suggesting how he or she should react, especially in the negative. If you say, "You're going to freak out when you hear this," or "Don't freak out, but...", you are setting your partner up to panic either way.

Simply say you have genital herpes, and ask if he or she knows what that means. Be prepared to present the facts.

Know as Much as You Can About Genital Herpes First

Before you tell, learn all you can about genital herpes so you can be prepared to answer any questions your partner may have. Stress that it's very common. Hearing the one-in-five statistic could be a relief. Also explain what it means to have it. Some people get sores on their genitals occasionally, but many others get symptoms so mild they don't even notice them.

Choose your words wisely. You don't want to load the discussion with negative imagery. Although genital herpes is a disease, saying that you have this "disease" conjures up unpleasant images, so avoid using that word. Watch your adjectives, too. Don't describe your condition as "horrible," "disgusting," or "incurable."

Pick the Right Setting

In addition to language, the setting can affect the outcome, too. Don't interrupt what your partner is doing to break the news. That is, don't call him or her at work, or barge into a room and say, "Hey, we have to talk." That's how you might deliver news of a death in the family or start an argument.

The right setting is a relaxing one, just the two of you, where there won't be any distractions. A conversation over a quiet dinner or a walk in the park is preferable to a bowling alley or the supermarket.

The worst time to tell, other than after having sex, is during foreplay or when your clothes are already off. That would not only spoil the mood, but it could also annoy your partner, starting the conversation on the wrong foot.

It would be best to let the topic come up naturally in conversation. That way, it would seem less like a bombshell and more like any other development in your life. For example, you could say, "Just so you know, my doctor called me yesterday with some test results, and said I have the virus that causes genital herpes."

If you've never slept with the person before, it's not impolite to ask if he or she has any sexually transmitted diseases. You could start the conversation by being the first one to ask. It's possible that he or she might start giving you the same herpes information you had been preparing to give.

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It's also possible that your partner might take the news badly no matter how well you deliver it. In that case, don't get defensive. Allow him or her some time to think it over in private, calm down, and come to terms with it. It may not be the first challenge you've faced together, and if the relationship is valuable enough to continue, it won't be the last.

For insight into your partner's concerns, see [Frequently Asked Questions -- If Your Partner Has Genital Herpes](#).

For guidance about resuming an intimate relationship, see [Your Sex Life](#) and [Re-Entering the Dating Scene](#).

For more information and help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see [Resources](#) and the [Glossary](#).

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Resources

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The following resources will help you locate more health information, referrals to clinics and clinical trials, hotlines, support groups, and more for genital herpes.

For Information

- **American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists**

www.acog.org

Several educational pamphlets are available. Follow the link from the home page to the ACOG Bookstore.

- **CDC Division of Sexually Transmitted Diseases**

www.cdc.gov/std

CDC National STD Hotline

English: (800) 227-8922, (800) 342-2437

Spanish: (800) 344-7432

The web site of the CDC's STD division has statistics galore, plus fact sheets and links to other public-health resources, such as local and state health departments.

The CDC also operates the National STD Hotline. Specialists at the hotline answer questions, provide referrals to clinics, and will send printed materials.

- **The National Institutes of Health, ClinicalTrials.gov**

www.clinicaltrials.gov

ClinicalTrials.gov is a service of the National Institutes of Health. You can search the web site for clinical trials that are looking for patients to sign up. The database includes studies sponsored by government agencies, drug companies, universities, and other organizations.

For Support

- **American Social Health Association**

www.ashastd.org

ASHA National Herpes Hotline

(919) 361-8488

Among the many herpes resources compiled by the American Social Health Association are links to contact information for support groups. These groups operate in most U.S. states. There are also groups in Canada Sydney, Australia. The web site also hosts an online chat moderated by an ASHA Herpes Resource Center staff member Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday from 5 to 6 p.m. ET.

You can also speak to a trained health communication specialist on the ASHA National Herpes Hotline Monday-Friday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. ET.

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Another ASHA web site, www.iwannaknow.org, provides sexual health information written specifically for teens.

The ASHA offers printed materials for sale, such as *The Helper*, a quarterly newsletter, and *Managing Herpes*, a book co-authored by herpes expert Anna Wald, MD.

- **International Herpes Alliance**

www.herpesalliance.org

This web site has links to support groups in the United States, Australia, Canada, France, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, South Africa, and Sweden. You can also read personal stories by people living with herpes and share your own. Text on the site is available in English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Chinese, and Japanese.

For quick and simple-to-understand information about genital herpes, see WebMD's Frequently Asked Questions articles:

[About Your Diagnosis](#)

[How You Can Tell if You Have Genital Herpes](#)

[If Your Partner Has Genital Herpes](#)

For help understanding words you may hear about genital herpes, see the [Glossary](#).

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Glossary

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You may hear some of the words and terms that follow as you learn about genital herpes. We have chosen some that seem obvious, but have slightly different meanings when used in the context of genital herpes. For example, you may think you know what genitals are, but read the definition.

antibodies

Antibodies are proteins that circulate in the body. Whenever a person is exposed to a new pathogen (a virus or bacterium), the immune system creates specific antibodies for it. When an antibody bumps into the pathogen, it sends a message to the immune system's "killer" cells, prompting them to attack the invader.

antiviral

Antiviral drugs are used to treat viral infections, just as antibiotics treat bacterial infections. The main practical difference is that antiviral drugs for genital or oral herpes and many other viruses (HIV, for example) do not kill the virus and wipe out the infection. These antiviral agents slow the virus' **replication** process, helping to control, not cure, the disease. Antibiotics, however, are usually able to cure bacterial infections completely.

clinical trial

Clinical trials are scientific studies designed to test whether a new medical treatment is safe and effective. There are four phases of clinical trials. Phase I is a small study that looks at safety only. Phase II looks at safety and efficacy (whether or not it works). Phase III is a large study that's the last step before approval by the FDA, or a similar regulatory agency in other countries. Phase IV monitors the treatment's long-term safety and efficacy after it has been approved for consumers.

cold sore

This sore appears on the lips or skin close to the lips and is caused by the herpes virus. **HSV-1** causes most cold sores. See **fever blister**.

dental dam

A dental dam is piece of **latex** rubber that's designed to be used as a barrier to sexually transmitted diseases. It's placed over the vaginal area or anus during cunnilingus and anilingus. A latex glove or condom cut into a square sheet can be used as an alternative.

dormant

A virus, such as herpes, is either active or dormant. When active, the virus is **replicating** and perhaps **shedding**. When dormant, it is hiding somewhere in the body, not replicating. **HSV-2** usually hides; that is, it escapes attack from the immune system in clusters of nerve tissue near the base of the spine when it is dormant. When it's active, it travels up a nerve to the surface of the skin.

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episodic therapy

Episodic therapy for genital herpes involves taking **antiviral** drugs for a few days as soon as the patient feels an outbreak of symptoms coming on (what doctors call "prodromal" symptoms) or within one day after the symptoms appear.

fever blister

Fever blister is another common name for a **cold sore**.

genitals

Genital herpes affects not only the reproductive organs, but also the anus, perineum (skin between the anus and reproductive organs), and inner thighs, in addition to the penis shaft, foreskin, urethra, glans (head), and scrotum of a man, and the vagina, cervix, labia, clitoris, and urethra of a woman.

HSV, HSV-1, HSV-2

HSV stands for herpes *simplex virus*. There are two types: Type 1 usually infects the mouth and type 2 usually infects the **genitals**. The two types are referred to as HSV-1 and HSV-2.

latex

Latex rubber comes from a tree. When you're advised to use a latex condom, it means you should not use "lambskin" condoms, which are made from sheep intestines. Latex is a strong, flexible material. It's also a good barrier to most sexually transmitted viruses since bacteria are too big to pass through the microscopic holes in the material. The animal tissue from which some condoms are made has microscopic holes big enough for some of these pathogens to pass through. Condoms made of polyurethane -- a synthetic material -- are a good alternative to latex for people who have a latex allergy.

mucous membrane

This is tissue that lines a body cavity and contains mucous-secreting glands. The linings of the mouth, the vagina, rectum, and urethra are mucous membranes.

primary infection

Primary infection is when a virus first enters your body and takes up residence. Some symptoms of primary **HSV-2** infection are different from the **recurrent** symptoms that come later.

recurrent, recurrence

Herpes is a recurrent infection. That means the infection never goes away. The symptoms may disappear for a while, but they come back periodically. Something like the flu, for example, is not a recurrent infection. Once it runs its course, it's gone, and you don't have the flu again until you're infected with another flu virus.

replicating, replication

Replication is how a virus reproduces. It simply makes copies of itself. A copy is exactly the same as the original, unless a mutation (a mistake, basically) takes place when the DNA is being copied. In that case it becomes a new kind, or strain, of virus.

sexual activity, having sex

Sexual activity or "having sex," in reference to sexually transmitted diseases, includes penile-vaginal intercourse and penile-anal intercourse, as well as oral-vaginal (cunnilingus), oral-penile (fellatio), and oral-anal (analingus) stimulation. The definition does not include masturbation, rubbing bodies through clothes, and other things that may be thought of as sexual but don't carry a risk for infection.

shedding

The herpes virus "sheds" when it's **replicating** on the skin's surface. The virus is contagious then, because it can rub off on another person.

suppressive therapy

Suppressive therapy for genital herpes involves taking **antiviral** drugs every day to keep viral **replication** in check and makes the **recurrence** of symptoms less frequent.

For more information, check out the [Resources](#) guide.

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