

HERPES, GENITAL

BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

A virus infection of the genitals transmitted by sexual relations (intercourse or oral sex). It can affect sexually active males and females and may involve the vagina, cervix, thighs, but-tocks (sometimes) and penis. Genital herpes is often found in the presence of other sexually transmitted diseases.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- ~ Painful blisters, preceded by itching, burning or irritation on the vaginal lips or penis. In women, the blisters may extend into the vagina to the cervix and urethra. After a few days, the blisters rupture and leave painful, shallow ulcers that last 1 to 3 weeks.
- ~ Difficult, painful urination.
- ~ Enlarged lymph glands.
- ~ Fever and a general ill feeling.

CAUSES

- ~ Herpes type 2 virus (HSV-2). Herpes type 1 virus (HSV-1) causes common cold sores, which appear around the mouth, but can sometimes cause genital herpes.
- ~ Genital herpes is transmitted by a sexual partner who has active herpes lesions. Lesions may be on the genitals, hands, lips or mouth (including type 1 virus). Once transmitted, incubation period is 2 to 7 days. Sometimes, the infection can be acquired without any symptoms only to have a delayed out-break.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- ~ Serious illness that has lowered resistance.
- ~ Use of immunosuppressive or anticancer drugs.
- ~ Stress (increases susceptibility to a primary infection or a recurrence). Stress may lead to diminished efficiency of the immune responses that usually suppress growth of the virus.
- ~ Smoking.
- ~ Other "triggers" that can cause a recurrence include genital trauma, menstruation, sunbathing, and existing infection of some other type.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- ~ Avoid sexual intercourse if either partner has blisters or sores.
- ~ Use a rubber condom during intercourse if either sex partner has inactive genital herpes (especially important if the infected partner has frequent recurrences).
- ~ Avoid oral sex with a partner who has cold sores on the mouth.
- ~ If you are pregnant, tell your doctor if you have had herpes or any genital lesions in the past. Precautions should be taken to prevent infection of the baby.
- ~ Avoid stress where possible.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- ~ Genital herpes is currently considered incurable, but symptoms and recurrence can be relieved with treatment.
- ~ During symptom-free periods, the virus returns to its dormant state. Symptoms recur when the virus is reactivated. Recurrent symptoms are not new infections.
- ~ The discomfort varies from person to person and from time to time in the same person. The first herpes infection is much more uncomfortable than following ones.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- ~ Generalized disease and death in persons who must take anticancer drugs or immunosuppressive drugs.
- ~ Transmittal of life-threatening systemic herpes to a newborn infant from an infected mother.
- ~ Secondary bacterial infection.

TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- ~ Diagnosis is usually determined by the appearance of the lesions, however, confirmation may be made by a laboratory study of fluid from the lesion.
- ~ Treatment is directed toward relieving symptoms and preventing complications.
- ~ Women should wear cotton underpants or pantyhose with a cotton crotch.
- ~ To reduce pain during urination, women may urinate in a shower, or urinate through a tubular device, such as a toilet-paper roll or plastic cup with the end cut out or pour a cup of warm water over genitals while urinating.
- ~ Warm baths with a tablespoon of salt added can ease some of the discomfort caused by the blisters.
- ~ Consider life-style changes to avoid emotional stress.
- ~ Women should have an annual Pap smear and physical examination to rule out any complications.
- ~ Additional information is available from the Herpes Resource Center, P.O. Box 13827, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709, (919) 361-8488.

MEDICATIONS

- ~ Antiviral medications in oral form are often prescribed for treatment of initial episodes and management of recurrent genital herpes. For some patients, they may be prescribed for prevention purposes. A topical form is available, but is not as effective.
- ~ Use mild painkillers, such as acetaminophen.

ACTIVITY

Avoid intercourse until symptoms disappear.

DIET

No special diet.

NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- ~ You or a family member has symptoms of genital herpes.
- ~ Symptoms don't improve in 1 week, despite treatment.
- ~ Symptoms worsen, despite treatment.
- ~ Unusual vaginal bleeding or swelling occurs.
- ~ Fever returns during treatment or you become generally ill.

Important Phone Numbers:

USI Student Health Center	465-1250
Monday - Friday 8a.m. - 4:30p.m.	
USI Wellness Center	464-1807
Deaconess Hospital	Emergency Dept. 426-3405

Adapted from Instructions for Patients, Sixth Edition, H. Winter Griffith, M.D., W.B Saunders Company.