OPA
OFFICE OF POPULATION AFFAIRS

Genital Herpes Fact Sheet

WHAT'S INSIDE:

- **What is** genital herpes?
- How **common** is genital herpes?
- How do people **get** genital herpes?
- What are the **symptoms**?
- **Testing / Diagnosis**
- **Treatment**
- What are the **complications** of genital herpes?
- **Reduce** your risk
- **Talk** to your partner

SOURCES:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

- Genital Herpes Fact Sheet
- Genital Herpes – The Facts

National Institute for Allergies and Infectious Diseases

- Understanding Genital Herpes

American Social Health Association

- Coping in a Relationship

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C.

What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is a common sexually transmitted disease (STD). There are two types of herpes simplex viruses that can cause genital herpes- herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) or herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2).

HSV-1 is typically an infection of the mouth and facial area which can cause cold sores. Oral infections of HSV-1 can also sometimes cause genital infection when passed to the genitals during oral sex.

HSV-2 is the cause of most cases of genital herpes.

How common is genital herpes?

16% (approximately one in six people) of the U.S. population between the ages of 14 and 49 years are estimated to have genital HSV-2. Genital HSV-1 infection is increasingly common.

A majority of adults in the U.S. have oral herpes (cold sores), which is almost always caused by HSV-1.

How do people get genital herpes?

Genital herpes is transmitted through direct skin-to-skin contact during vaginal, anal, and oral sex. Transmission can happen even if genitals only touch infected skin, and no penetration occurs. Oral herpes is most often contracted through kissing someone with a cold sore.

Herpes can be transmitted even with no symptoms present.

What are the symptoms of genital herpes?

Most people with genital herpes aren't aware they have the infection, as symptoms can be mild or mistaken for another condition.

A first or primary outbreak of herpes can be pronounced and painful. Symptoms can develop within a few weeks after contracting genital HSV and might include:

- One or more small, fluid-filled blisters or sores around the genitals, anus, thighs, and buttocks. Sometimes the sores develop inside the vagina. The sores usually scab like a cut and heal in two to four weeks, and more blisters can occur during this time. Painful urination is common during a first outbreak.
- During a primary outbreak of genital herpes, a person can also have flu-like symptoms that include headaches, fevers, and swollen glands, especially near the groin.

Testing / Diagnosis

Healthcare providers sometimes diagnose herpes by looking at the sores. Since symptoms of herpes can vary widely from person to person, some cases are difficult to diagnose this way.

A viral culture (taking a swab from a herpes sore or blister) is another way to diagnose herpes. A major advantage of this test is the reliability of a positive result, which can also be typed to determine if HSV-1 or HSV-2 is present.

Type-specific blood tests for herpes can also be done, and are the test of choice when no symptoms are present. These tests can accurately determine if a person has antibodies (substances in the bloodstream the body produces in response to herpes) to HSV-1 or HSV-2.

Treatment

There is no cure for herpes, but medications can treat symptoms and control outbreaks. There are antiviral medications approved to treat genital herpes. They are approved for treatment during an outbreak, as well as to reduce or eliminate outbreaks. Daily, or suppressive therapy, may reduce the risk of transmitting genital HSV to a partner.

Not everyone with herpes requires treatment.

What are the complications of herpes?

In healthy adults, herpes seldom leads to complications. Recurrent outbreaks are common, and sometimes these are painful. In someone with a weakened immune system, herpes outbreak can be frequent and severe.

HSV occasionally infects the eyes. If untreated, this can cause damage and, potentially, loss of vision. Ocular herpes most often happens when an oral HSV-1 infection becomes active and travels a nerve pathway to an eye. Typically, only one eye is affected.

While very uncommon, pregnant women can pass herpes to their babies. This is more likely to happen when a woman contracts herpes while pregnant, so it's especially important for pregnant women to be cautious. If a pregnant woman or her partner has genital herpes, she and her healthcare provider should talk about ways to protect her and

the baby. Most women with genital herpes deliver vaginally and have healthy babies. If a woman shows signs of a genital herpes outbreak at delivery, she will most likely have a caesarean section.

Genital herpes makes a person more likely to contract HIV, if exposed. This is primarily due to the open sores and blisters HSV causes. Also, HIV may be more infectious and likely to be transmitted in someone who has both HIV and HSV.

Reduce your risk

There are several things that can lower the risk of herpes:

- Avoid sex during outbreaks, or if the infected partner is experiencing symptoms in the genital area such as itching or tingling.
- Use condoms or other latex barrier (such as a dental dam) for each sex act (oral, anal, and vaginal). A barrier should be put on before any sexual contact takes place.
- Have sex with only one partner (who only has sex with you)
- Talk with your healthcare provider to see what STD tests might be recommended for you.

If you have been diagnosed with HSV, your health care provider may advise you to take a prescription HSV medication every day to reduce your risk of outbreaks.

Talk to your partner

When one partner has genital herpes, it may be a good idea for the other partner to be tested, too. Keep in mind that symptoms of genital herpes are often overlooked, and most people with genital herpes are not aware that they have the infection.

Herpes can be managed in a relationship, but communication and education are important. See the resources section on page one for more information on all aspects of HSV, including relationships.

All material contained in this fact sheet is free of copyright restrictions, and may be copied, reproduced, or duplicated without permission of the Office of Population Affairs in the Department of Health and Human Services. Citation of the source is appreciated.

This fact sheet was reviewed by: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention | Content last reviewed: 5/31/12 | Content last updated: 10/19/2012

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C.