

## Genital Herpes

# Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

### What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by two types of viruses—herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) and herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2).

### Is there a link between genital herpes and oral herpes?

Yes. Oral herpes (commonly called cold sores or fever blisters) caused by HSV-1 can spread from the mouth to the genitals through oral sex. This is why some cases of genital herpes are due to HSV-1.

### How is genital herpes spread?

Genital herpes is spread when someone with the herpes virus has vaginal, anal, or oral sex with someone who does not have the virus. You can get herpes if you have contact with:

- A herpes sore;
- Saliva from a partner with an oral herpes infection;
- Genital fluids from a partner with a genital herpes infection;
- Skin in the oral area of a partner with oral herpes; or
- Skin in the genital area of a partner with genital herpes.

You also can get genital herpes from a sex partner who does not have a visible sore or is unaware of their infection. It is also possible to get genital herpes if you receive oral sex from a partner with oral herpes.

You cannot get herpes from toilet seats, bedding, or swimming pools. You also cannot get it from touching objects, such as silverware, soap, or towels.

### How do I know if I have genital herpes?

Herpes sores usually appear as one or more blisters on or around the genitals, rectum, or mouth. This is known as having an “outbreak.” The blisters break and leave painful sores that may take a week or more to heal. Flu-like symptoms (for example, fever, body aches, or swollen glands) also may occur during the first outbreak.

However, most people with genital herpes have no symptoms or have very mild symptoms. Mild symptoms may go unnoticed or be mistaken for other skin conditions like a pimple or ingrown hair. Because of this, most people do not know they have a herpes infection.

People who experience an initial outbreak of herpes can have repeated outbreaks, especially if they have HSV-2. A tingling or burning sensation, or pain (prodrome) commonly occurs before a repeated outbreak. Treatment of recurrent genital herpes is most effective

if you start taking medication for herpes within one day of blisters appearing or during the prodrome that occurs before an outbreak. Repeat outbreaks are usually shorter and less severe than the first outbreak. Although genital herpes is a lifelong infection, the number of outbreaks may decrease over time.

### **How will my healthcare provider know if I have genital herpes?**

Your healthcare provider may diagnose genital herpes by simply looking at any sores that are present. Providers also can take a sample from the sore(s) and test it. Some providers may use a blood test to look for HSV antibodies if sores are not present.

Please note: A herpes test can help determine if you have herpes infection. It cannot tell you who gave you the infection or when you got the infection.

### **Is there a cure for genital herpes?**

There is no cure for genital herpes. However, there are medications that can prevent or shorten outbreaks. A daily anti-herpes medication can make it less likely to pass the infection on to your sex partner(s).

### **I'm pregnant. How could genital herpes affect my baby?**

If you are pregnant and have genital herpes, prenatal care visits are very important. Some research suggests that a genital herpes infection may lead to miscarriage or make it more likely to deliver your baby too early. You can pass herpes to your unborn child before birth, but it more commonly passes during delivery. This can lead to a deadly infection in your baby called neonatal herpes. Tell your prenatal care provider if you ever had a genital herpes diagnosis.

### **Can I still have sex if I have herpes?**

If you have herpes, you should talk to your sex partner(s) about their risk of getting herpes. Using condoms may help lower their risk, but it will not get rid of the risk completely. Having sores or other symptoms of herpes can increase your risk of spreading the disease. Even if you do not have any symptoms, you can still infect your sex partners. Herpes virus can be released (shed) from areas that do not have a visible herpes sore and areas that are not covered by a condom.

You may have concerns about how genital herpes will impact your health, sex life, and relationships. While genital herpes is not curable, it is important to know that is manageable with medicine. Daily suppressive therapy (daily use of antiviral medication) can lower your chances of having repeat outbreaks and spreading the virus to others. Talk to a healthcare provider about your concerns and treatment options.



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