

What do you know about...

Chlamydia

Vaginal health

**Genital herpes**

Gonorrhoea

Genital warts

Your guide to  
sexual health and  
wellbeing

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## Genital herpes: your questions answered

### Q. What causes genital herpes?

**A.** Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by a virus similar to the one that gives you cold sores around your lips. Genital herpes, however, causes painful blisters and sores on and around your genitals.

Almost everyone has come into contact with the herpes virus at some time in their lives, and may be infected without ever experiencing any symptoms. In fact, most people carrying the virus are unaware that they've ever been infected. But remember, just because you have the herpes virus, this doesn't mean you have genital herpes.

### Q. What are the symptoms of genital herpes?

**A.** It usually takes between two and 12 days after contact with the virus for the first symptoms to appear. Occasionally symptoms can be noticed years after initial contact. However, some people exposed to the virus never become infected, while others catch herpes but never have any symptoms. This means that most people with genital herpes don't know they are infected but can pass the infection on to others.

You may first notice some itching, tingling, inflammation and discomfort in the affected area. You can also experience general flu-

like symptoms, such as backache, headache and a temperature, and mild swelling of the lymph glands in the groin, armpits and neck.

You may then develop multiple spots or red bumps around the genital area which can be very painful. In time, these swellings can break open and form sores or ulcers, which gradually crust over, forming new skin as they heal. During this time, you may also feel pain when peeing or when opening your bowels.

This first episode of genital herpes may last from two to four weeks. Repeat episodes are hardly ever as severe as the first – and you may never have a repeat episode.

## **Q. How can you catch genital herpes?**

**A.** You usually catch genital herpes through direct skin contact with the virus. This can be from herpes sores in the genital area, or herpes sores on the mouth in the form of cold sores.

The genital herpes virus is passed on by kissing, vaginal and anal sex (genital contact), oral sex, and sharing sex toys.

Once you have picked up the infection, the virus stays in your body, lying dormant, and can recur in the area that was originally infected. If the virus reactivates, the ulcers can reappear and this is known as a 'recurrent episode'.

You can catch herpes even if your sexual partner has no visible sores or symptoms. This is because the virus can become active

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on the skin without causing any visible symptoms – this is known as ‘viral shedding’. Many people who have and pass on the virus may not even know they have herpes.

### **Q. What tests are there for genital herpes?**

**A.** If you or your partner are worried that you may have genital herpes, see a doctor straight away. You can visit your local GP surgery, or sexual health service. These are specialist services that deal with sexually transmitted infections, are confidential, and you can go to without having to see your GP first.

Getting tested is simple and straightforward. If you have visible blisters, the doctor or nurse may be able to make a diagnosis straight away. If there are no visible blisters then a diagnosis might not be possible at this time. A swab will be used to collect a sample. A swab looks a bit like a cotton bud, and collecting a sample only takes a few minutes - this may be uncomfortable for a moment. The doctor may also offer you testing for other sexually transmitted infections.

### **Q. If I have genital herpes, what happens next?**

**A.** Once you have been infected with genital herpes, the virus persists in your body and can cause a recurrence of symptoms from time to time. Recurrent episodes with symptoms will clear up by themselves without any treatment, but there is also medication to help speed up

the healing process. You should, however, always visit your GP or sexual health service to be sure that it is the herpes virus that is causing your symptoms.

The doctor may prescribe antiviral tablets to speed up the healing process and reduce the severity of an episode. If you start taking the medication as soon as an outbreak begins, you may shorten or even stop the episode.

Some people experience frequent recurrences. In these cases, a longer course of tablets should prevent any recurrent episodes. Talk to your doctor or nurse at the sexual health service, or to your GP, about possible treatment options that may suit you.

## **Q. Can I prevent an episode of genital herpes?**

**A.** Keep a record of when you have an episode of herpes. You may see a pattern developing and be able to identify your trigger factors. Many people find that episodes occur when they're run-down, under stress, around the time of menstruation, or when the skin gets irritated due to friction or tight clothing.

Sunlight (or the use of sunbeds) may also bring on an episode. If you do see a pattern of trigger factors, try to adjust your lifestyle to avoid or reduce your exposure to them.

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## **Q. How do I tell my partner that I have genital herpes?**

**A.** Your partner could already have herpes but not know it – and may have got this from a previous partner. Three-quarters of people with the herpes virus have a mild infection that they do not realise they have it.

Some people can feel upset, angry, frightened or embarrassed about discussing sexually transmitted infections with their current or former partner(s). The doctor or nurse will talk to you about who you may need to tell and how you can do it.

## **Q. How can I avoid passing on genital herpes?**

**A.** If you have herpes, you can follow some simple guidelines to avoid passing the virus on to your partner(s), and to continue to have a healthy and happy sex life:

- Learn to recognise the warning signs (tingling, itching or inflammation) that an episode is starting. Do not have sex at this time.
- Do not allow anyone to come into direct contact with your sores or blisters.

- Avoid kissing and oral sex when you or your partner have cold sores around the mouth – or you feel that sores may be developing.
- Remember that you can still shed the virus without having any symptoms. You should always use condoms with any new partner and for any type of sexual contact. This is important when having sex with new partners.
- The herpes virus survives within the nerves of your skin and can be passed through skin-to-skin contact. So even if you use a condom to reduce spreading, the virus may still be present on your skin that is not covered by the condom after you no longer have any symptoms. This means there is still a chance you could pass it to someone else.

You might want to talk things over in confidence with a trained volunteer who can provide advice on living with genital herpes. Call the **Herpes Viruses Association Helpline** on **0845 123 2305**.

## **Q. What about genital herpes and pregnancy?**

**A.** The herpes virus does not affect fertility in women or men. In addition, if a woman is infected with genital herpes before becoming pregnant, there is very little risk to the baby as the mother will already have antibodies to pass on. However, the mother may be given antivirals to prevent

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an episode when giving birth – you should discuss this with your doctor or midwife.

It can, however, be more serious if the mother is infected for the first time during pregnancy. If this happens in the first three months of pregnancy, there is a small risk of miscarriage.

If the first infection happens in the last 10 to 12 weeks of pregnancy, there is a small risk the virus can be passed on to the baby. In this case, it may be necessary for the mother to have a caesarean section to avoid infecting the baby.

### **Q. Can using a condom protect me from genital herpes?**

**A.** Always use a condom consistently and correctly to protect against genital herpes – the herpes virus can't pass through a condom. However, if the virus is present and active on the genital skin or in areas not protected by the condom, it may still be passed on.

The best way to prevent all sexually transmitted infections, including genital herpes, as well as to protect against HIV, is to practise **safer sex**. This means using a condom for vaginal, oral and anal sex.

## Safer sex

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) can pass from one person to another through unprotected sex and sharing sex toys. You don't need to have lots of sexual partners

to get an STI. However, you are more likely to have an STI if you have had a recent change in sexual partner or if you have had more than two sexual partners in the last 12 months.

Safer sex involves using condoms and dental dams for oral sex, condoms for vaginal sex and condoms with water-based lube for anal sex. This helps prevent infections being passed onto your partner.

Condoms are available free from sexual health services, and young people's drop-in services. They are also for sale at most pharmacies and supermarkets. Always use a quality condom that displays the European CE Kitemark.

**For more information, visit**

**[www.sexualhealthscotland.co.uk](http://www.sexualhealthscotland.co.uk) or call NHS Inform free on 0800 22 44 88 (textphone 18001 0800 22 44 88).**

**The helpline is open every day 8am to 10pm and also provides an interpreting service.**