

Genital Herpes

PATIENT INFORMATION

What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is a common sexually transmitted infection which can cause blisters or ulcers on the genital skin. It is caused by a virus called herpes simplex virus (HSV). Genital herpes is similar to cold sores found on the mouth: they are both caused by the HSV virus, just different types. Genital herpes can be due to either type 1 or 2 and cold sores are usually due to type 1.

How does someone get genital herpes?

- HSV is passed on through sexual contact with someone who has the infection. Sexual contact includes oral, vaginal or anal sex and sex play. The virus can be passed on even if the other person doesn't have symptoms or realise that anything is wrong.
- It can also be passed from mother to baby during childbirth, but this is very rare.

How do I know if I have genital herpes?

- The most common symptoms are painful blisters and sores on the genital skin. These usually develop within a few weeks of a person getting the virus, but some people never get any symptoms, or can get them months to years later.
- When a person gets their first outbreak of genital herpes it can sometimes be severe and last a few weeks. Sometimes people can feel like they are getting the "flu" or have pain in the buttocks or legs. It can also be difficult to go to the toilet due to the painful sores.
- Most people with the virus don't get any symptoms.

How do I get tested?

- The diagnosis is visual and you will need to be examined. The doctor or nurse who is seeing you will take a swab from one of the blisters or sores. The test can only be done when you have symptoms.
- There is no reliable test to tell if people are just carrying the virus. A routine sexual health check does not include tests for HSV.

How do I get treated?

If this is the first time you have symptoms you will be given some tablets to take. The medication does not cure the virus, but helps to clear the symptoms up more quickly.

Many people who have symptoms of genital herpes will get further outbreaks. These are usually mild with a few blisters or sores and they heal up quickly within a week.

Some people get hardly any outbreaks and don't usually need any treatment, but some people get them often and they need medication regularly to stop the outbreaks from happening. Type 2 causes more frequent outbreaks than type 1.

How do I look after myself during an outbreak?

- Some people feel tired and unwell during an outbreak so it is important to get plenty of rest.
- If the sores are painful this can often be managed by using a numbing gel for the skin, which you can get from your doctor.
- Be sure to look after your skin, don't use soap on the area or rub it. Salt water bathing may help to soothe the skin and keep it clean.

How can genital herpes can affect my health?

- HSV infection can cause recurrent blisters and sores that are uncomfortable.
- It does not cause cancer and it does not affect a woman's chances of getting pregnant.
- HSV can be transmitted to babies during birth, but this is very rare. If you are pregnant it is important to discuss genital herpes with your midwife or doctor.
- Genital herpes can cause people to feel upset, depressed and ashamed. If you need extra support, your doctor or nurse can talk further with you about this and arrange counselling if you need it.

What do I tell my partner(s)?

If you are in a relationship it is sensible to have a discussion about sexual health so that you both have the chance to share information. Partners should be advised to get a general sexual health check for other STIs. It is important to talk to your partner about genital herpes, but this is sometimes very difficult to do and your doctor, nurse or counsellor can help you manage this.

Important advice

You can get infected with HSV and not get symptoms of genital herpes.

Many people (80%) who get HSV don't ever get any symptoms at all, or get very mild symptoms and do not know that they have the virus.

- When a person has blisters or sores from genital herpes they are very infectious and it is best not to have any sexual contact.
- When there are no symptoms there will sometimes still be virus on the skin, so the infection can still be passed on, although there is lower risk.
- Using condoms regularly will provide some protection to sexual partners.

Important information

- Genital herpes is a very common sexually transmitted infection caused by a virus (HSV).
- The symptoms are similar to cold sores found on the mouth, except they appear on genital skin.
- Most people with genital herpes don't have any symptoms. The virus may be passed on by people with no symptoms.
- Treatment does not get rid of the virus, however it controls symptomatic outbreaks
- There is effective oral anti-viral treatment available and multiple treatment options
- It is recommended to avoid sexual contact when symptoms are present.

The Ministry of Health supports the use of these clinical guidelines, developed by clinical experts and professional associations to guide clinical care.

This patient information leaflet has been produced by NZSHS. Every effort has been taken to ensure that the information in this leaflet is correct at the time of publishing (September 2017).