

Patients' Guide to Genital Herpes

What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is a common STI that can be painful, recurrent, and inconvenient but has no long term effect on a person's general health or fertility.

There are two types of the herpes simplex virus (HSV): HSV-1 and HSV-2.

HSV-1 is the cause of "cold sores" on the lips. More than half of adults may have come into contact with the virus during childhood. In adults, it can be passed to the genitals through oral sex or through genital to genital contact.

HSV-2 is the cause of most genital infections through sexual contact.

People infected with HSV may not be aware they have it since it often causes no symptoms.

How is it passed?

Genital herpes can be passed on:

- through direct skin contact with an infected area; one doesn't need to have penetrative sex (vaginal or anal)
- from one person to another during vaginal or anal sex, or by sharing sex toys
- from mother to child during birth

If one is infected with herpes, it does not mean that one recently had sex with an infected person. This is because the infection could have been picked up in the past and not cause any symptoms until much later.

Using condoms all the time during sexual activities may help reduce the risk of spreading or getting genital herpes, but it does not give 100% protection.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Infected individuals may not have any visible signs or symptoms, or may not even be aware of them.

However, an individual experiencing symptoms may present the following:

First episode genital herpes

- Small blisters which break down to form sores in the genital or anal area
- Swelling in the groin glands
- Usually more painful and severe
- Lasts up to 2-3 weeks

Recurrent/repeated genital herpes

- Itch and irritation in the area where blisters have not yet appeared
- Usually mild, less painful, and only on one side of the genitals
- Usually heals within a week, with or without medication
- The outbreaks tend to become less frequent and there is no way of predicting when and how often they will appear

When do signs/symptoms appear?

Most symptoms rarely appear or are so mild that they go unnoticed. However, when they do appear, they may occur 2-12 days after the exposure, or even months or years later.

Infected individuals are to avoid all sexual activities until the sores have healed.

How is genital herpes diagnosed?

Genital herpes is diagnosed by

- its characteristic appearance
- using a cotton-tipped swab from the blister/sore
- using Type Specific Serological Tests (TSST) for HSV (a blood test that indicates previous exposure to HSV).

A person who is infected for the first time may not give a positive blood test until ~6 weeks later.

Interpretation of HSV TSST Results

HSV-1	HSV-2	INTERPRETATION
-	-	Not infected with either virus OR infected but the test was done too soon after exposure. The results will not be reliable if there has been sexual exposure within the previous 6 weeks.
+	-	Infected with HSV-1 The test cannot tell where the infection is. It may likely involve the lips and mouth, although genital infection is increasingly common due to oral sex.
+	+	Infected with HSV-1 and HSV-2 It is likely that the HSV-1 infection is on the mouth and the HSV-2 infection is on the genitals.
-	+	Infected with HSV-2 some time in the past. Infection is sexually transmitted and on the genitals.

Who should get tested?

One is encouraged to get tested if one or one's partner(s) have symptoms of genital herpes.

Can genital herpes cause other problems?

Infection can be severe and persistent in people with weakened immune systems, such as people living with HIV. Infected individuals may also face difficulties passing urine if they are infected with genital herpes

How can herpes affect pregnancy?

Women who were infected with herpes before pregnancy face a lower risk of complications. Conversely, women who are infected with herpes after pregnancy face the highest risks.

Genital herpes does not affect fertility in women, but infected women may pass on the infection to their babies during delivery. As such, they should inform their healthcare professional to determine the best form of delivery.

Herpes infection in newborns can cause blindness or brain damage.

Can genital herpes be treated?

One may not require treatment for genital herpes if there are no symptoms

Although herpes is not curable, it is not life-threatening in adults. Treatment is aimed to keep symptoms under control.

Oral anti-viral medications are usually given for the more severe first outbreaks. If taken early, they help to reduce the severity of the outbreaks.

Suppressive treatment (daily medication) may be prescribed for those who have very frequent outbreaks to reduce its frequency.

How do individuals with herpes tell their partners?

Will having genital herpes affect my relationship?

Honesty in every relationship helps to ease unnecessary worry, stress, and guilt as to whether you will or have passed the infection to your partner, or that they have passed it to you.

Telling your partner that you have genital herpes shows that you care about them and want to protect them from getting infected. This will lead the way towards a more healthy and trusting relationship.

How do I tell my partner?

If it is a new partner, it is best to give it some time before telling. Allow the relationship to grow and develop. It will be easier once there is comfort and trust in each other's company.

Reach Out to Us

If you still have queries, feel free to call us at the following numbers:

HIV/STI Hotline (8am – 5pm)

1800 252 1324

Health Info Recorded Hotline (24 hours)

+65 6295 2944

Appointments

+65 6293 9648

You may also visit www.dsc-clinic.sg for more information, or find us at the DSC Clinic, 31 Kelantan Lane #01-16 S(200031).

Disclaimer

We have attempted to provide full, accurate, and up-to-date information in this patient information leaflet, based on current medical evidence and opinion. However, information and advice may vary from different sources and over time. If you have any further questions, do see your doctor or healthcare provider.

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