Fact Sheet: Oral Herpes

What is Herpes?
Herpes is a viral infection caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). There are two types of herpes, herpes simplex 1 (oral) and herpes simplex 2 (genital). The first infection with HSV 1 usually occurs before 5 years of age. Antibodies to HSV 1 are found in 50-90% of adults. Cold sores (HSV 1) are typically found on the lips and in the mouth, but can be passed to the genital area during oral sex.

What are the symptoms?
HSV 1 will usually start with sores or blisters in or around the mouth (“cold sores”). These crust and heal within a few days. Some people find that stress, illness, injuries, certain foods or eating poorly may cause the sores to return.

How is it spread?
HSV 1 is primarily spread through skin to skin contact with the infected person; however, it can be transmitted occasionally through sharing of drinks, lip products (i.e.: Chapstick, lipstick) and moist washcloths and towels. Wash your hands after touching the sores. HSV 1 can be transmitted to any area of the body, including the genitals and the eyes.

How is it treated?
Herpes is a virus and cannot be treated with antibiotics. Your health care provider can prescribe anti-viral medications that may decrease the severity of the outbreaks.

How is it prevented?
• Avoid skin-to-skin contact of the infected area with another person until the skin is completely healed.
• Wash hands thoroughly after touching the affected area.
• Learn to know your own symptoms if you have herpes and consider treatment if you have more than 6-9 outbreaks per year.
• Learn what kinds of things trigger your symptoms and avoid them when possible.
• Don’t share washcloths, towels or other personal items during a recurrence.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov.