

Fact Sheet: Genital Herpes

What is Genital Herpes?

Herpes is a viral infection caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). This virus can cause “cold sores” (HSV I) and genital sores (HSV II). Herpes symptoms reoccur during periods of high stress, illness, and poor nutrition. Pregnant women can pass this disease to their baby during vaginal delivery, sometimes causing serious infections and even death. During oral sex, HSV I can be passed to the genital area and HSVII can be passed to the mouth.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms occur 3 to 21 days after contact with the infected person. People with herpes can be contagious for about 2 to 7 weeks during their first attack and 4 to 7 days with recurrent outbreaks. It is also possible to spread the disease to others without having symptoms.

Typical symptoms for women include:

- Itching and burning during urination
- Painful, fluid-filled blisters that break and turn into open sores, then crust over and heal
- Flu-like symptoms
- Swollen glands
- Vaginal discharge

Typical symptoms for men include:

- Itching and burning during urination
- Painful, fluid-filled blisters that break and turn into open sores, then crust over and heal
- Flu-like symptoms
- Swollen glands

For both men and women, symptoms may be mild or non-existent and go unnoticed.

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 call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.

How is it spread?

Genital herpes is commonly spread by direct contact with a blister or discharge from a sore. Many carriers are without symptoms, but can still spread the virus to others. It can be spread to other parts of the infected person’s body, or to another person through kissing, sexual intercourse (including oral, anal and vaginal sex), or careless hygiene. You cannot get genital herpes from toilet seats, telephones, or hot tubs. Wash your hands after touching the affected area. Be especially careful to avoid contact with your eyes. Do not share towels and washcloths.

How is it treated?

Herpes is a virus and cannot be treated with antibiotics. Once you have the virus, you can only treat the symptoms with anti-viral medications that reduce recurrent outbreaks. New research suggests that suppressive treatment during the first year after an initial outbreak greatly reduces future recurrences. The anti-viral medications are well tolerated, but can be costly.

How is it prevented?

- **Don’t have sex.** You cannot give or get a sexually transmitted disease (STD) if there is no contact with the penis, vagina, mouth or anus.
- **Limit your number of sexual partners.** The more people you have sex with, the greater the chance of getting an STD.
- **If you choose to have sex, be prepared.** Have condoms with a water-based lubricant on hand and use a new condom every time you have sex.
- **Have regular exams if you are sexually active.** If you think you have an STD, get tested. Ask your partner(s) to get tested.
- **Remember: a Pap smear is not a genital herpes test.** A herpes culture can only be done when there is a sore present. In some instances, your provider may recommend a blood test as well.
- **Telling your partner.** Tell anyone you have had sex with, that they may have been exposed to the herpes virus. If you have herpes, talk with your partner BEFORE you have sex, and consider avoiding intimate contact when sores are present.