

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 I (oral) and herpes simplex II (genital). The first infection with HSV I usually occurs before 5 years of age. Antibodies to HSV I are found in 50-90% of adults. Cold sores (HSV I) 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 I 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.

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?

HSV I 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 I 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.

