

What Is Genital Herpes?

Genital herpes is a common sexually transmitted infection caused by herpes simplex virus (HSV).

HSV causes a chronic infection that may reactivate, causing genital herpes recurrences or viral shedding. Two types of HSV (HSV-1 and HSV-2) cause genital herpes. In the US, newly diagnosed cases of genital herpes are most frequently due to HSV-1 infection, which can also cause cold sores around the lips and mouth. The exact prevalence of HSV-1 genital infections is unknown. In 2018, an estimated 18.6 million people in the US had genital HSV-2 infections. Approximately 65% of genital herpes infections occur in women.¹

Symptoms, Recurrence, and Viral Shedding of Genital Herpes

Most people with genital herpes are undiagnosed due to mild or unrecognized symptoms. Symptoms of a first episode of genital herpes include 1 or more fluid-filled blisters that may coalesce into painful genital ulcers and flu-like symptoms such as headache and fever.

Recurrence frequency varies among people. In the first year after becoming infected, people with genital herpes due to HSV-2 have approximately 5 recurrences and those with HSV-1 infection have 1 recurrence. Recurrence rates typically decline over time.

People with genital herpes can shed the virus from their genital area and transmit the infection to another person during sex or childbirth. Shedding can occur during a recurrence of genital herpes or when people with genital herpes infection have no symptoms.

How Is Genital Herpes Diagnosed?

To diagnose genital herpes, a swab from a genital ulcer is tested for HSV by polymerase chain reaction; most tests differentiate between HSV-1 and HSV-2. A blood test to detect HSV antibodies may be recommended for individuals with suspected genital herpes if a genital sample was not obtained or was negative, for persons with atypical symptoms such as genital itching or burning, or for those with a sexual partner who has genital herpes. HSV-2 antibody tests can produce false-positive results, so a confirmatory test may be recommended if an HSV antibody test is positive.

How Is Genital Herpes Treated?

Antiviral medications such as acyclovir, famciclovir, or valacyclovir can reduce the severity of genital herpes symptoms, decrease the frequency of recurrences, reduce viral shedding, and improve quality of life. Depending on the frequency of recurrences, patients with genital herpes may take antiviral medication daily to prevent most recurrences or take short courses of antivirals for each recurrence

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1. Johnston C, Wald A. Genital herpes. *JAMA*. 2024; 332(10):835-836. doi:10.1001/jama.2024.12743

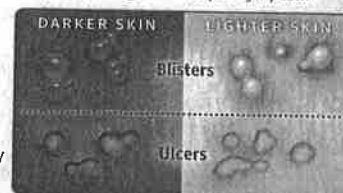
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Genital herpes is a common sexually transmitted infection that is caused by the herpes simplex virus, HSV-1 and HSV-2. HSV is a chronic viral infection that may cause recurrent episodes of genital herpes symptoms.

Signs and symptoms of genital herpes may include

- Fluid-filled blisters that may turn into painful ulcers
- Itching or burning
- Flu-like symptoms such as headache and fever, particularly with the first episode



Recurrences of genital herpes occur at different rates among individuals and HSV-2 infections typically recur more frequently than HSV-1.

Treatment with antiviral drugs can help

- Decrease severity of symptoms
- Decrease frequency of recurrences
- Reduce viral shedding that can infect others during sex or childbirth
- Improve quality of life

Ways to decrease the risk of HSV transmission include

- Taking daily antiviral drugs
- Consistently using condoms
- Abstaining from sex when symptoms of genital herpes are present
- Informing your partner that you have genital herpes

at the onset of symptoms. It is recommended that pregnant individuals with a history of recurrent genital herpes take antiviral medication beginning at 36 weeks' gestation to decrease the risk of viral shedding and genital herpes recurrence at the time of delivery.

How to Prevent Transmission of Genital Herpes

People with genital herpes can decrease the risk of transmitting HSV by taking daily antiviral therapy, which decreases the risk of HSV-2 transmission in heterosexual sex by about 50%. Other strategies include consistently using condoms and abstaining from sex when there are signs or symptoms of a recurrence. People with genital herpes should also inform sexual partners about their infection.

Other Infections Associated With Genital Herpes

HSV-2 infection is associated with a 2- to 3-fold increased risk of acquiring HIV. Herpes infection of newborns (neonatal herpes) occurs in 10 to 31 newborns per 100 000 live births in the US and is typically acquired during vaginal delivery. Neonatal herpes can cause infection of the skin, eye, mouth, and brain or widespread infection, and can be fatal.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention