

# Genital Herpes

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*This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a healthcare professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.*

## **What is genital herpes?**

Genital herpes is an infection caused by the herpes simplex virus. The virus can cause painful blisters and sores on the genitals (sexual organs) and/or on the mouth. If you have symptoms, you need to be examined by a doctor or nurse and have lab tests done, not only to diagnose herpes, but also to diagnose other possible sexually transmitted infections.

## **How is it spread?**

Genital herpes can be spread by having unprotected sex - not using a condom - with someone who is infected with the herpes virus, whether the person has sores or not. Herpes can be spread from the mouth to the genitals when one partner has cold sores and engages in oral-genital sex. Even very small breaks in the skin allow the virus to enter and start an infection.

## **What are the symptoms?**

Most people with herpes don't recognize the symptoms. Sometimes, symptoms may not become visible for months or years. You can have herpes and not know it.

Symptoms of genital herpes can include painful red dots or tiny blisters on the genitals, swollen glands, fever, and body aches. Other warning signs include itching, burning, tingling and leg pain.

Usually, symptoms begin to show up two to thirty days after having sex with someone who has herpes. The first outbreak of blisters is usually longer and more severe than outbreaks that may occur later.

After the first outbreak, the virus withdraws into the nerves below the skin in the area where the sores first appeared. During this time, the virus does not cause symptoms and remains inactive. Once a person is infected with the virus, it remains in the body for life. In most people, the virus becomes active from time to time, causing repeated blisters and sores.

## **What are the complications?**

Complications are generally rare and usually occur with the first genital herpes outbreak. Women who are newly infected late in pregnancy can pass the infection to their baby during childbirth. If the virus travels to another part of the body, it may cause disease in that part of the body.

## **What is the treatment?**

Medication can be prescribed when herpes first develops or if the blisters continue to appear. Treatment will help to reduce discomfort from the symptoms, but there is no cure for herpes. A healthy lifestyle, such as a good diet, rest and exercise, may help reduce the number of outbreaks.

To ease discomfort when you have symptoms, try the following:

- Wear loose-fitting clothing and cotton underwear;
- Soak in warm water baths;
- Keep the infected area dry;
- Do not use ointments or creams, medicated or non-medicated.

**Important:** Do not have sex until you and your sexual partner(s) have finished all the medication. Take all of the medication exactly as instructed.

**Should I be tested for other sexually transmitted infections (STIs)?**

If you have different sexual partners, or if your partner has different partners, you should also be tested for other STIs including gonorrhea, chlamydia, syphilis, and HIV (the virus linked to AIDS). You also should consider getting vaccine shots to prevent hepatitis B infection.

**Please remember:** The more sexual partners you have, the higher your risk of getting a STI.

**Ways to reduce your risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection**

- Have sex with only one partner who has been tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), who has been treated if necessary and who is having sex only with you. The more partners you have, the higher your risk of getting an STI.
- Use a female or male condom every time you have sex. Condoms offer protection against STIs, but they must be used properly.
- Have regular check-ups for STIs.
- Decide not to have sex.

**Contact Information**

For more information contact Yukon Communicable Disease Control at 667-8323. #4 Hospital Road, Whitehorse, Yukon

In the communities call toll-free 1-800-661-0408 extension 8323.

**Adapted from BC HealthFiles**