

# Questions and answers about genital herpes

## What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is an infection that produces cold sore-like blisters in the genital area. It is caused by the *herpes simplex* virus, which also causes cold sores around the mouth. Genital herpes is a common condition. Some estimates show that as many as 20 million persons in the United States have genital herpes and that 300,000-600,000 more persons get herpes each year.

## How does a person get this disease?

The infection is passed from person to person by sexual contact, either through sexual intercourse or through oral-genital contact. The virus enters the body through the moist areas of the genital region.

Herpes can also enter through any area of the skin that is rubbed vigorously against a herpes sore, especially if the skin in the area is scraped. Getting herpes from a toilet seat or towel is very unlikely. A person usually develops symptoms of genital herpes within a week after becoming infected,

## What happens when a person has herpes?

Although herpes sores generally appear on the genital area, the anus, buttocks, and thighs also can become infected. The sores may form blisters, which then break. They grow a crust and heal in about 2-4 weeks, and they usually don't leave scars. The affected areas may remain painful until they heal.

Even after the sores have cleared, the virus remains in the body. In most persons, it becomes active from time to time. New sores appear, but they usually don't last as long as the first ones. The symptoms are milder, too.

## What causes the herpes virus to become active again?

No one knows for sure what causes the herpes virus to become active again. A few factors that seem to activate the virus in some people are emotional stress, fever, menstruation, sexual intercourse, masturbation, friction from tight clothing, and exposure to heat or sunlight. Predicting exactly when the virus is going to become active again is impossible, but some people say they can feel it coming on. They develop a tingling, burning sensation or pain in the area where the sores will appear. This may happen 24-48 hours before sores come back again.

## How is genital herpes treated?

Although there is no cure for genital herpes, here are some measures you can take to help relieve the pain and speed up the healing time of the sores.

- *Practice good hygiene.* Keep the sores clean by washing them *very gently* with warm, soapy water and then rinsing. *Avoid rubbing the sores.* Prolonged soaking also can worsen the sores. Be sure to dry them very gently and thoroughly. You might use a hair dryer at a low setting or pat the sores dry.
- *Keep the sores dry.* Your doctor will tell you what to use to keep them dry. He or she may recommend applying talcum powder or cornstarch. If possible, wear loose-fitting cotton undergarments and don't wear tight pants or clothing made of synthetic fibers. This will help prevent sweating.
- *Apply ice or an ice pack to the sores* if the pain is severe.
- *Take a pain reliever.* Aspirin or acetaminophen at the dosage recommended on the bottle is a good choice. Your doctor may suggest other pain relievers. If urinating is painful, try relieving yourself in a tub of lukewarm water. But remember not to soak for more than a few minutes or the sores may worsen.
- *Your doctor may prescribe a special antiviral medication.* Acyclovir (Zovirax) is an antiviral drug. It won't keep the sores from coming back, but it can help reduce some of the

symptoms and speed healing. It takes a few days to begin working, though, and it's fairly expensive.

### **How can I keep from spreading genital herpes?**

Avoid sexual contact from the time the first tingling, pain, itching, or other symptom of a recurrence appears until the sores are completely healed.

Even when you don't have sores, there's a chance you may spread herpes to someone else, so take precautions between outbreaks:

- Use condoms and spermicidal foam for contraception, even if your partner also has genital herpes. Both offer some protection against transmitting the disease, but they are not foolproof. These products do not prevent sores on the thighs or buttocks from transmitting the virus through cuts or scrapes on your partner's skin.
- Wash your genital area with soap and water after intercourse,

### **What are the long-term risks of having genital herpes?**

Though it's not known for sure, women who have had genital herpes might have an increased risk of developing cervical cancer. The best way for a woman with herpes to reduce the risk is to have a yearly pelvic examination, including a Pap smear. There doesn't seem to be any serious long-term health risk for men.

A pregnant woman who has genital herpes can transmit the virus to the baby at birth. If you're a woman and you want to become pregnant, be especially careful to avoid sex when you or your partner has active herpes sores.

When you become pregnant, make sure your doctor knows you have genital herpes. During the last several weeks of your pregnancy, your doctor can watch closely for new sores. If you have an outbreak near delivery time, he can deliver the baby by cesarean section to prevent infecting the baby.

### **Where can I get additional help?**

Persons with genital herpes often feel a wide range of difficult emotions, including guilt, depression, and anger. Having genital herpes can strain relationships. But it's important to keep a positive frame of mind-after all, herpes generally is not life threatening. Furthermore, there are several self-help and support groups that can help you adapt to the situation. Here are just a few of the groups:

- The Herpes Resource Center, sponsored by the American Social Health Organization, P.O. Box 100, Palo Alto, CA 94302. The center publishes a quarterly newsletter and can steer you toward local chapters that may offer educational and counseling services.
- The National VD Hotline, 1-800-227-8922 (California residents call 1-800-982-5883), will answer many of your questions. The hotline is also sponsored by the Herpes Resource Center.
- Your city or state public health department may sponsor special clinics.