

# Genital Herpes

Genital herpes is a very common Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) caused by herpes simplex virus, either type 1 (HSV-1) or type 2 (HSV-2). Most people with genital herpes do not have any symptoms and are not aware that they have herpes. HSV-2 usually affects the genitals (vagina, penis, anus) and the surrounding skin causing blisters and open sores. HSV-1 commonly affects the lips and mouth and is also becoming a more common cause of genital herpes. A person can test positive for both types of herpes viruses.

## ***What are the symptoms of genital herpes?***

- The first time a person gets symptoms (known as an outbreak) of genital herpes is usually the worst. A person may have swollen glands, fever, and body aches in addition to blisters and open sores. These sores may last 2-3 weeks, first “weeping”, then scabbing over, and then healing.
- Repeat outbreaks of herpes are common, especially during the first year after infection. Repeat outbreaks are usually shorter and less severe than the first outbreak. Some people have tingling or itching at the site of the sores before they appear. This is called a prodrome and it is possible to pass the infection to a partner during this time, even before visible blisters appear.
- Although the herpes virus stays in your body the rest of your life, the number of outbreaks tends to decrease over time. Repeat outbreaks of genital herpes caused by HSV-1 are less frequent than those caused by HSV-2.

## ***How is herpes spread?***

- You can get herpes by having oral, vaginal, or anal sex with someone who has herpes. Contact with the fluid from a herpes blister or sore can cause infection.
- With your first herpes infection, take care not to touch the fluid from the sores or the sores themselves. You may transfer the infection to another part of your body, including your eyes. Wash your hands carefully.
- Some people may never have symptoms but can infect partners during “asymptomatic shedding”. This is when virus can be released through your skin (usually from the vagina, penis, or anus) and can spread the infection to a partner.
- Condoms can help prevent the spread of herpes; however, outbreaks can occur in areas not covered by condoms. Not having sex when you or your partner is having symptoms helps decrease the chance of spreading herpes.

## ***How is herpes diagnosed?***

- Often your clinician can diagnose genital herpes by simply looking at your symptoms.
- If you have blisters or sores, your clinician may take a sample from the sore and send it to the lab. The lab test can identify HSV-1 or HSV-2.
- On very rare occasions, the clinician may order a herpes blood test. Please ask if you have questions about blood testing.

## ***How is herpes treated?***

- There is no cure for herpes but there are herpes medications that can be helpful when you have an outbreak. There are also medications that can help prevent outbreaks and the reduce the spread of herpes to sexual partners. Other medications like acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil) can help with discomfort. Warm baths may provide relief from discomfort as well.

## ***Is Herpes serious?***

- Herpes is seldom a serious condition. However, people with suppressed immune systems may have more serious, painful outbreaks.
- Having herpes will not prevent you from having a healthy baby. A pregnant person who has herpes should tell their health care provider so that steps can be taken to protect the baby's health.

## ***How do I talk with a partner about herpes?***

- Regardless of symptoms, having herpes may cause a person some distress. It can be helpful to talk with your health care provider or join a support group.
- We recommend discussing a herpes diagnosis with a prospective sex partner as it is possible for them to become infected even when using a condom.
- If you have a regular partner, they may want to do a herpes test as they may already be infected. Please feel free to talk with your clinician about this.

### **For more information:**

Please talk with your City Clinic clinician or your own health care provider. The following websites also offer helpful information:

#### **General STI**

[www.ashasexualhealth.org](http://www.ashasexualhealth.org) (also in Español)  
[www.cdc.gov/std/](http://www.cdc.gov/std/)  
[www.sfcityclinic.org](http://www.sfcityclinic.org)  
[www.sfsi.org/](http://www.sfsi.org/)

#### **Teens**

[www.iwannaknow.org](http://www.iwannaknow.org)  
  
[www.kidshealth.org/teen](http://www.kidshealth.org/teen) (also in Español)  
[www.scarleteen.com](http://www.scarleteen.com)

#### **Contraception and STI/sex info**

[www.bedsider.org](http://www.bedsider.org)

#### **Herpes Info**

[www.bayareafriends.org](http://www.bayareafriends.org)  
[www.westoverheights.com/handbook](http://www.westoverheights.com/handbook)  
[www.herpeseonline.org](http://www.herpeseonline.org)

#### **Book**

[The Good News about the Bad News](#) by Terri Warren

For a STI check-up or treatment,  
see your health care provider, local clinic, or come to:



A landmark in prevention

City Clinic  
356 7th Street  
(between Folsom and Harrison)  
San Francisco, CA 94103  
(628) 217-6600  
[www.sfcityclinic.org](http://www.sfcityclinic.org)