



Patient education: Genital herpes (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is herpes?

Herpes is an infection that can cause blisters and open sores on the genital area. It is caused by a virus that is passed from person to person during vaginal, oral, or anal sex. Sometimes, people do not know they have herpes because they do not have any symptoms.

Herpes cannot be cured. But the disease usually causes most problems during the first few years. After that, the virus is still there, but it causes few to no symptoms. Even when the virus is active, people with herpes can take medicines to reduce and help prevent symptoms.

What are the symptoms of herpes?

Some people with herpes never have any symptoms. But other people can develop symptoms within a few weeks of being infected with the herpes virus.

Symptoms usually include blisters in the genital area. In females, this area includes the vagina, butt, anus, or thighs. In males, this area includes the penis, scrotum, anus, butt, or thighs. The blisters can become painful open sores, which then crust over as they heal.

Sometimes, people can have other symptoms that include:

- Blisters on the mouth or lips
- Fever, headache, or pain in the joints
- Trouble urinating

The first time you have symptoms is usually the worst, and without treatment, symptoms can last as long as 2 to 3 weeks. After that, symptoms come and go. A return of symptoms is often

called an "outbreak." Outbreaks usually include blisters and open sores in the genital area. Outbreaks that happen after the first time are usually not as severe and do not last as long.

Outbreaks might occur every month or more often, or just once or twice a year. Sometimes, people can tell when an outbreak will occur, because they feel itching or pain beforehand. Sometimes they do not know that an outbreak is coming because they have no symptoms. Whatever your pattern is, remember that herpes outbreaks usually become less frequent over time as you get older.

Certain things, called "triggers," can make outbreaks more likely to occur. These include stress, sunlight, menstrual periods, or getting sick.

Is there a test for herpes?

Yes. If you have blisters or sores when your doctor or nurse examines you, they can order a test to look for herpes. There are a few different tests that can do this. For all of them, the doctor or nurse takes a sample of cells or fluid from a sore and sends it to the lab.

If you don't have symptoms when your doctor or nurse examines you, they will sometimes take a blood sample for testing. This can show them if you have been exposed to the virus.

Should I see a doctor or nurse?

Yes. You should see your doctor or nurse if you have symptoms of genital herpes.

How is herpes treated?

Your doctor can prescribe different medicines to help reduce symptoms and help you heal faster during an outbreak. These medicines work best when people start them as soon as possible after an outbreak starts. You and your doctor should work together to decide which medicine is right for you.

Is there anything I can do on my own to feel better?

Yes. To reduce the pain during an outbreak, you can:

- Use a portable bath (such as a "Sitz bath") where you can sit in warm water for about 20 minutes. You can also do this by filling a bathtub with a few inches of water. Avoid bubble baths.
- Keep the genital area clean and dry, and avoid tight clothes
- Take over-the-counter pain medicine such as [acetaminophen](#) (sample brand name: Tylenol) or [ibuprofen](#) (sample brand names: Advil, Motrin). But avoid [aspirin](#).

You should also let your doctor or nurse know if you are worried or upset about your herpes. They can talk with you about your feelings. Plus, you might want to join a support group for people with herpes. You can also call the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) STD hotline at 1-800-227-8922 for help.

What if I am pregnant?

If you are pregnant, talk with your doctor. It is possible to pass herpes on to your baby during birth, especially if your first outbreak starts near the time of delivery. Talk with your doctor or nurse about things you can do to help prevent this.

Can future outbreaks of symptoms be prevented?

Some people with herpes take a medicine every day to help prevent future outbreaks.

What can I do to prevent spreading herpes to my sex partner?

You are most likely to spread herpes to a sex partner when you have blisters and open sores on your body. But it's also possible to spread herpes to a partner when you do not have any symptoms. That is because herpes can be present on your body without causing any symptoms, like blisters or pain.

Telling your sex partner(s) that you have herpes can be hard. But it can help protect them, since there are ways to lower the risk of spreading the infection. The best ways to do this are:

- Using a condom every time you have sex
- Not having vaginal or anal sex when you have symptoms
- Not having oral sex if you have blisters or open sores (in the genital area or around your mouth)

You might also be able to lower the risk of spreading herpes to a partner by taking an antiviral medicine every day. Your doctor or nurse can talk to you about whether this is an option for you.

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