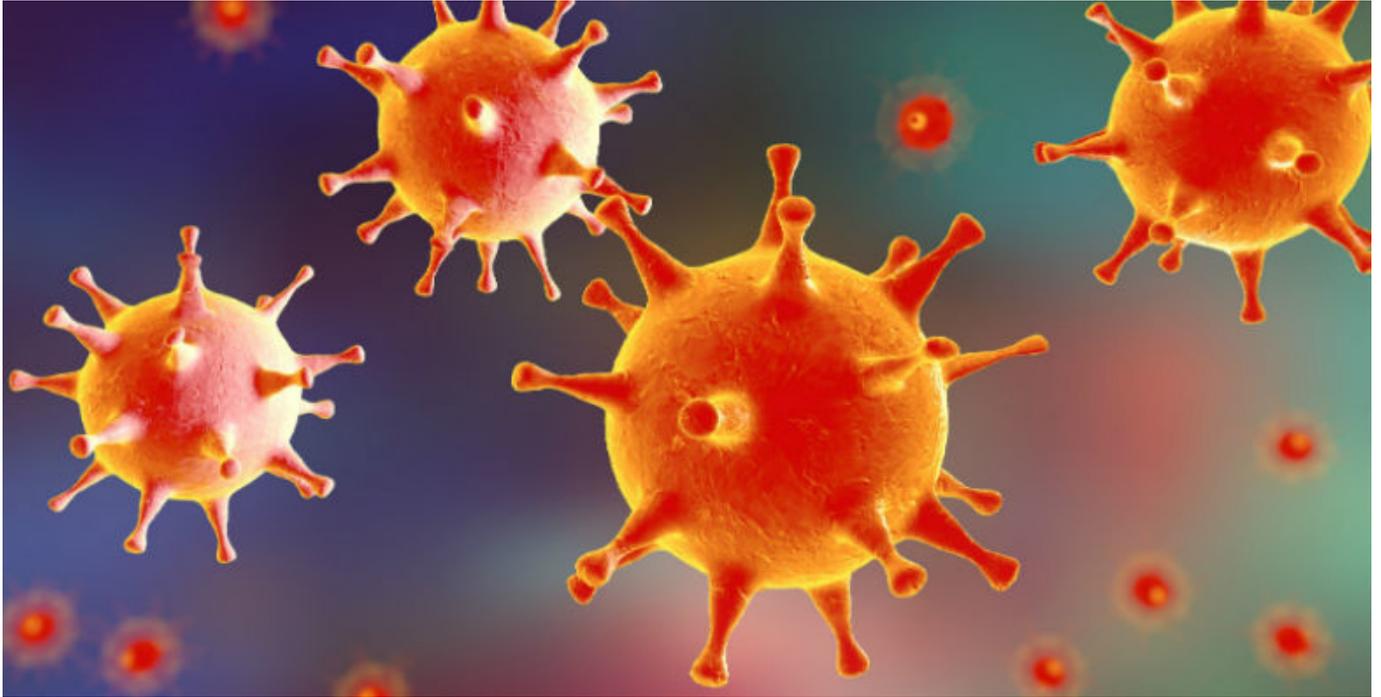


Genital herpes symptoms & treatment



FAST FACTS

- Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that causes infected sores or blisters.
- It's caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV) which can be passed on through close genital contact.
- You can reduce your chances of getting genital herpes by using condoms or dental dams during sex.
- If you think you have symptoms of genital herpes you should see a healthcare worker, they can take a swab from a blister and test to confirm if it's caused by the herpes simplex virus.
- Treatment can help with herpes outbreaks, but the virus cannot be cured and will remain in the body. This means that blisters normally come back once in a while.

What is herpes?

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that causes blisters and ulcers. Herpes is caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV), which is transmitted through skin-to-skin contact.

Herpes can affect various areas of the body but is most commonly found on the genitals, anus or mouth. The blisters heal with time (usually within 2-3 weeks), but the virus that causes them cannot be cured, and herpes outbreaks will often reoccur.

How do you get genital herpes?

Herpes is most infectious when you have blisters, but the virus can be passed on even when someone has no symptoms (normally immediately straight before or after an outbreak).

Herpes is passed on through skin-to-skin contact, including [vaginal](#), [anal](#) or [oral](#) sex without a [condom](#) or [dental dam](#). This means the virus can be passed on even if you don't have penetrative sex, orgasm or ejaculate (cum).

Herpes can be passed on by sharing sex toys that aren't washed or covered with a new condom each time they are used.

If you have genital herpes while pregnant you can pass the virus on to your unborn baby. Speak to your healthcare provider if you're pregnant and worried you might have herpes.

How do you avoid getting or passing on genital herpes?

If either you or your partner has a herpes outbreak (or if you feel like you might be about to get one), it's best to wait until the symptoms have cleared up before having sex.

Using a new [male](#) or [female condom](#) or dental dam every time you have [vaginal](#), [anal](#) or [oral](#) sex will reduce the risk of herpes being passed on.

Herpes can also be transmitted by sharing sex toys. To reduce your risk, either avoid sharing your sex toys or make sure that they are washed and covered with a new condom between each use.

Use a new dental dam or latex gloves for rimming and fingering (exploring your partner's anus with your fingers, mouth or tongue) or use latex gloves for fisting, especially if you get herpes on your hands.

Talking about your sexual health with your partners, and letting each other know about any infections that you have, can help you make decisions about safer sex together. Reducing your number of sexual partners can help you reduce your risk of getting sexually transmitted infections, like genital herpes. If you are having sex with multiple partners, it's even more important to use condoms and to have regular STI checks.

Condoms are the best form of protection against STIs and pregnancy. Other [contraceptives](#) including the contraceptive pill will not prevent herpes, and neither will [PrEP](#).

What do genital herpes symptoms look like?

The most common symptoms of herpes are small blisters that burst to leave red, open sores. You can get herpes blisters on your penis, vagina, anus, throat, on the top of your thighs and buttocks or around your mouth (where they're called cold sores).

Other symptoms can include:

- pain when urinating (peeing)
- tingling or burning around the genitals
- feeling unwell, with aches, pains and flu-like symptoms
- unusual vaginal discharge in women.

Many people with genital herpes won't get any symptoms, or may get symptoms for the first time months or even years after they were infected.

For most people, the blisters go away within one to two weeks. Although the outbreaks clear-up by themselves, the virus stays in the body. This means that people usually get blisters again - which is called having a 'recurrent outbreak'. Outbreaks usually become shorter and less severe over time.

Can I get tested for genital herpes?

Yes, if you think you have symptoms of genital herpes or have been at risk of infection, you should speak to a healthcare worker.

There are different tests available. If you have symptoms, the most common test is to take a swab from a blister. The fluid can be tested for the herpes simplex virus.

Some places may also offer blood tests to check for antibodies to the virus, but these are often not routinely available, so ask a healthcare worker if you're unsure.

If you have genital herpes you should be tested for other STIs.

It's also advised that you tell your recent sexual partner/s so they can also get tested and treated. Many people who have genital herpes do not notice anything wrong, and by telling them you can help to stop the virus being passed on.

How is genital herpes treated?

There is no cure for the herpes simplex virus. The blisters usually heal and go by themselves, so you may not always need treatment. There is antiviral medicines for herpes, which can: shorten outbreaks, relieve discomfort and stop symptoms from getting worse.

The antiviral treatment is most effective when you take it within the first five days of symptoms appearing. Avoid touching the blisters as this can also increase the risk of spreading the infection. If your herpes treatment requires you to apply cream to a sore, just gently pat the cream on, being careful not to rub around the surrounding area.

You can ease your symptoms by:

- keeping the affected area clean using plain or salt water to prevent blisters or ulcers from becoming infected
- applying petroleum jelly, such as Vaseline, to any blisters or ulcers to reduce the pain when passing urine
- asking a healthcare provider to recommend painkilling creams
- avoiding tight clothing because it may irritate the blisters and ulcers.

Don't have sex until you or your partner have finished your treatment, and the blisters or ulcers have gone. If it's your first outbreak, it's sometimes advised that you check back with a healthcare provider before having sex again, to ensure that your symptoms have gone.

Genital herpes and pregnancy

It's really important to speak to a healthcare worker if you have herpes during pregnancy, especially if it's your first outbreak. There's a risk that your baby can develop 'neonatal herpes' which can be very dangerous or even fatal for the baby. If you have herpes, your healthcare provider will be able to prescribe antiviral treatment to keep your baby safe and help you have a healthy pregnancy.

Speak to a healthcare worker for more information or if you have any concerns.

Genital herpes, HIV and sexual health

Genital herpes is one of the most common [co-infections](#) for people living with HIV and can be a more serious condition if you're HIV positive - meaning that outbreaks may last longer and blisters can be more severe. If you're having recurrent outbreaks of genital herpes, you should have an [HIV test](#), as this may be a sign of a [weakened immune system](#) caused by HIV.

Having an STI such as genital herpes can increase your risk of [getting and passing on HIV](#), as the blisters and sores provide an easy way for HIV to get into your body and cause an infection. People living with HIV who aren't on [treatment](#) or who have a lower [CD4 count](#) are especially vulnerable to other infections, like herpes.

If you're taking antiretroviral treatment for HIV, it's important to discuss with your doctor how treatment for herpes may interact with your HIV drugs.

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Sources:

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