



Genital herpes

Genital herpes is caused by herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) or herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2). HSV-1 mainly causes cold sores (labial herpes) but can also infect the genitals via oral sex. HSV-2 occurs almost exclusively in the genitalia and is transmitted via sexual intercourse.

How common is it?

Approximately 15–20 per cent of adult women and 10–15 per cent of adult men is infected, although most infected people experience no symptoms.

Symptoms

“Primary genital herpes” refers to the first outbreak in a person who has not been infected with HSV previously. The symptoms may be noticeable at this time, and include genital blisters and sores, fever and swollen lymph nodes. These symptoms may persist for up to 2–3 weeks.

When genital herpes breaks out the next time, the symptoms are milder and include blisters/sores located on the genitals or the buttocks, only. Symptoms usually disappear within one week. It is primarily HSV-2 that causes recurring herpes. In some patients, herpes causes unusual symptoms, such as recurring fissures or intermittent localized pain and redness in the genital area.

A person can carry HSV and be completely symptom-free, and their first outbreak with noticeable symptoms might even occur many years after they were first infected.

Sample collection

A sample will be taken from a suspicious blister or sore using a cotton swab. If a long time has passed between the blister first appearing and the sample collection, the test result may be negative even though the symptoms are being caused by HSV. It takes around 1–2 weeks to process HSV test results.

Treatment

Antiviral therapy can be used to soothe or shorten a genital herpes outbreak, but it cannot remove the virus from the body. It is important to begin treatment early in the course of an outbreak if it is to be effective. Patients who suffer from often-recurring outbreaks may be given daily, preventive treatment using antiviral drugs. However, many patients do not experience very severe symptoms and do not need to take any medication.

How HSV spreads

HSV can be passed on when a person carrying the virus has symptoms, but it can also be transmitted and infect a sexual partner when no symptoms are present. Most infections are transmitted by people who do not have current, visible herpes lesions.

Condoms offer good protection against infection.

It seems there is no risk of becoming reinfected with HSV if a person is already infected.