

What You Need to Know

# Genital and Oral Herpes 101

## What is herpes?

Genital herpes is a common sexually transmitted infection caused by two different forms of the Herpes simplex virus—Herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) and Herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2).

Herpes is a lifelong infection, remaining dormant in the body with occasional reactivations that result in outbreaks.

## What are the symptoms of herpes?

Herpes causes painful blisters of the mouth, genitals, or anus. Before blisters appear, you may experience burning or tingling in the affected area. When herpes blisters break open, they leave sores that heal over time.

Some people with genital herpes experience discharge from their genitals. Herpes can also cause bleeding between periods.

The first herpes outbreak in a newly infected person may be associated with flu-like symptoms such as fever and swollen lymph nodes.

Most people with herpes have relatively minor symptoms, though people with suppressed immune systems can experience more severe disease.

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## How can you catch herpes?

Herpes simplex virus type 1 causes oral herpes, resulting in sores of the mouth and lips commonly known as cold sores or fever blisters. HSV-1 is transmitted through contact with an infected partner's saliva or the skin around the lips and mouth. HSV-1 can rarely spread to the genitals through oral sex.

Herpes simplex virus type 2 causes genital herpes and is most commonly spread through vaginal or anal sex with an infected partner.

Either type of herpes virus can be spread from mothers to their babies during childbirth. Pregnant mothers with herpes should talk with their doctor.

## Is herpes treatable/curable?

There is no cure for herpes. Once you have the virus, it will remain dormant in your body and will periodically reactivate, causing an outbreak.

Herpes usually activates during times of stress—including emotional stress, illness, or trauma. Other triggers for activation include fatigue, menstruation, or immunosuppression caused by AIDS or the use of medications such as steroids or chemotherapy.

Taking antiviral medication every day can reduce the frequency and severity of outbreaks and make it less likely that the virus will be spread to a sexual partner. Antiviral medications used to treat herpes include acyclovir, valacyclovir, and famciclovir.

## Preventing herpes transmission

Using condoms or other barrier devices during sex can reduce, but not eliminate, the risk of getting herpes. The risk of transmission can also be reduced by an infected partner taking daily antiviral medication and by avoiding sexual contact during a herpes outbreak.