



Whatcom County Health Department

FACT SHEET: GENITAL HERPES

What is genital herpes?

Herpes is an infection caused by a virus. There are two types of herpes that may be transmitted sexually. Either of them can infect the mouth or genitals. Type 1 virus usually causes sores near the mouth. Many people call these cold sores or fever blisters. Type 2 virus usually causes sores near the genitals.

Millions of Americans have herpes, but not all of them are aware of it. There are over 500,000 new herpes infections each year in America.

How do you get herpes?

- Any skin-to-skin contact can spread herpes from a person who has the virus to a person who does not.
- The virus is passed from the site of infection to the site of contact.
- Over 70 percent of these infections are passed from one person to another by people who do not know they have herpes.

What are the symptoms?

- The first signs appear from two to 21 days after sex with a person who has the virus.
- Small fluid-filled sores appear. They may itch, burn, or be very painful.
- Flu-like symptoms are also common.
- The first outbreak lasts from one or two weeks. Then, the sores begin to dry, form scabs, and heal. They rarely leave scars.
- You can get herpes from people who have the virus **even if they have no symptoms**.
- Herpes often looks like other skin diseases.
- See a doctor for a test.

What is a recurrence?

- After the first infection heals, the virus leaves the area of the sores and stays near the spinal cord. It does not cause any infection there.
- We don't know what makes the virus become active and travel to the mouth or genitals again.
- Some people with herpes have one to six outbreaks each year. Some people have none.
- Some say that diet, stress, other illness or skin irritation can trigger outbreaks. Each person is different.
- Later outbreaks have fewer sores, heal faster and are less painful than the first infection.

Problems with pregnancy

- Pregnant women with genital herpes can give the disease to their babies. **This is most serious if the woman gets infected for the first time when she is pregnant.**
- It is very important that the doctor be told if a woman or any of her partners has genital herpes.

Is there a cure?

- There is no cure for herpes at this time. But, there is a drug that your doctor can prescribe that may help the sores heal faster and reduce the number of outbreaks.
- If you have sores:
 1. Keep the area clean and dry.
 2. Don't touch the sores.
 3. Wash your hands after contact with the sores.
 4. Don't have sex until the sores are healed and new skin covers the area.
 5. Tell your sexual partner that you have a history of herpes.

