

HERPES

What is herpes?

Herpes is caused by one of two viruses: herpes simplex type 1 (HSV1) and herpes simplex type 2 (HSV2). Herpes is a common infection that causes "cold sores" or "fever blisters" on the mouth or face (known as oral herpes) and similar symptoms in the genital region (known as genital herpes).

How is herpes spread?

Herpes is transmitted by direct skin-to-skin contact, directly from the site of infection to the site of contact. For example, if you have a cold sore and kiss someone, the virus can infect your partner's mouth. Herpes can also be spread sexually when there are no visible signs or symptoms.

What are the symptoms?

First episodes of the disease tend to be more severe than recurrences. Symptoms of an infection may include a burning or tingling sensation, followed by multiple painful vesicles at the site of infection (e.g., cervix, vulva, penis, mouth, hands). A low percentage of patients experience symptoms so severe that they must be hospitalized. Women often have more severe first episodes than men. Subsequent recurrences of infection vary from person to person. Some people who have HSV infection never experience symptoms. About one in four adults in the U.S. has latent genital herpes. However, less than a third have been diagnosed.

How soon do the symptoms appear?

The first symptoms appear within 2 to 12 days after infection.

How long can an infected person spread the virus?

Patients with primary genital lesions are infectious for about 7-12 days, and with recurrent disease from 4-7 days. Asymptomatic viral shedding is probably common.

How is herpes diagnosed?

If you have symptoms, the most common test is a viral culture. To perform this test, your physician must take a sample from a lesion, preferably on the first day.

What is the treatment for herpes?

There is no cure for herpes, but there are medications which help to keep the virus in check. Current medications are safe and have few side effects. Suppressive therapy greatly reduces the number of outbreaks for most people, and can prevent outbreaks altogether for some.

How can one reduce the risk of spreading herpes?

- Abstain from sex when signs and symptoms of genital herpes are present.
- Tell your partner if you have herpes. Use condoms between recurrences of herpes.
- Condoms offer useful protection against unrecognized herpes by protecting the mucous membranes that are the most likely sites of transmission.
- Wash your hands after touching sores or using the bathroom.
- Avoid kissing others when you have active cold sores to prevent the spread of oral herpes.

What are some complications?

- Although rare, during delivery a newborn can contract herpes if the mother has active herpes at the time.
- Herpes infections in the newborn are often quite severe, and may result in permanent neurologic (nervous system) or ocular (eye) damage, even death of the newborn.
- It is possible to move the virus from the location of the outbreak to other places on the body by touching the sore (s).
- The fingers, eyes, and other body parts can become infected in this manner.
- Encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) may result from primary or recurrent infection and is associated with fever, alterations in the state of consciousness, and convulsions.

Where can I get more information?

- Your personal doctor.
- Your local health department listed in the telephone directory.
- The Utah Department of Health, Bureau of Epidemiology (801) 538-6191.
- National Herpes Hotline (919) 361-8488, Monday-Friday 9 am to 7 pm (Eastern standard time).

**UTAH DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
BUREAU OF EPIDEMIOLOGY**

August 2001