

Herpes

Herpes is a common viral infection that is spread by skin-to-skin contact. Herpes outbreaks usually show up as one or more little sores on the mouth, genitals or anus. A herpes infection is often so mild that there are no obvious symptoms.

There are two types of herpes:

- + herpes simplex type 1 (HSV-1)
- + herpes simplex type 2 (HSV-2)

We used to think of HSV-1 as the cold sore virus, and HSV-2 as the genital herpes virus, but we now know that this is not true. Either type can occur in either location.

People can get herpes on the mouth through non-sexual contact, such as a kiss from a relative. However, it is also possible to get herpes on the mouth through oral sex. Herpes on the genitals or anus is usually caused by sexual contact.

Herpes **symptoms** are often called an “outbreak”. Symptoms can range from none, to mild, to severe. The symptoms that show up and how long they last are different for each person.

Many people have such mild outbreaks that they do not notice them. Other people may have uncomfortable or painful outbreaks.

GENERAL SYMPTOMS

- + One or more sores that look like water blisters, cuts, ulcers or broken skin.
- + An itchy, tingling, burning, raw, or painful feeling on your skin.

- + Pain in your legs or buttocks.
- + Swollen and tender lymph nodes in the groin area.
- + Painful urination (peeing).
- + A change in vaginal discharge.
- + Swollen genitals.

OUTBREAKS: FREQUENCY AND SEVERITY

- + HSV-2 causes more outbreaks than HSV-1
- + New infections have more outbreaks
- + Weaker immune systems have more outbreaks

HERPES SPREAD AND PREVENTION

Herpes is spread by direct skin-to-skin contact. The herpes virus spreads most easily during an outbreak. It also can spread when you don't have symptoms. This is called asymptomatic shedding.

If you have itching or tingling in the area where you usually get symptoms, or if you have visible sores:

- + do not touch other areas of your body
- + do not have skin-to-skin contact with another person
- + wash your hands often until the skin is completely healed
- + use barriers, like condoms.
 - + condoms **do not** fully protect against herpes because they do not cover the entire genital area.
- + use barriers like dental dams for oral-genital contact (mouth on genitals or anus).

HOW IS HERPES NOT SPREAD?

Herpes is not spread by sharing toilet seats, furniture, sleeping in the same bed, or hugging. The virus does not live for more than a few minutes on most surfaces and is easily killed with soap and water.

TESTING

If you see symptoms of herpes, or your health care provider has told you that you may have herpes, you can get a lab test. There are a few different tests used in British Columbia.

Swab test

This test can tell you if you have the herpes virus, what type you have. A swab is taken from a sore or the surface of the skin to collect a sample of the virus. For best results, it is important to have sores swabbed within 72 hours of seeing the symptoms. Otherwise, the test may not pick up the virus if the sores have started to heal.

Non-type-specific blood test

This test can tell you if you have the herpes virus, but it will not tell you which type of herpes you have or where on your body you have it. Because herpes is very common, this test will be "positive" for many people.

Type-specific blood test

This test can tell you if you have the herpes virus and what type of herpes you have, but it will not tell you where on your body you have it. This test is not covered by the BC Medical Services Plan.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT?

There is no cure for herpes, but **medications** can help with symptoms. Prescription antiviral medication, such as acyclovir, valacyclovir, and famciclovir, work best if taken within 72 hours of an outbreak. These medications may shorten the length and severity of the outbreak, or stop it all together. You can get a prescription for these medications ahead of

time, to have ready in case you get an outbreak.

The outbreak will go away even if you don't take antiviral medication.

Managing Symptoms

- + Eat well and get plenty of rest.
- + Put ice packs (wrapped in a towel) on the sore skin for a short period of time.
- + Take Acetaminophen (Tylenol) or Ibuprofen (Advil).
- + Keep the skin area dry.
- + DO NOT break open the blisters and do not put anything on your skin until you have seen a health care provider.
- + Avoid sexual contact with the area. If you directly touch the area, wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water afterward.

For Genital Herpes

- + Wear loose-fitting clothes and comfortable cotton underwear during an outbreak to reduce rubbing of the sore skin.
- + Have warm baths or use a portable bath (like Sitz baths). Do not add bubble bath.

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- + If urination (peeing) hurts, pour or squirt warm water over your genitals when peeing or pee in a warm shower or bath.
- + Use a blow dryer on the cool setting to dry the area after bathing instead of using a towel.
- + Do not sit for long periods of time.

LIVING WITH HERPES

There can be a lot of shame and stigma around herpes. For some people, finding out they have herpes can stir up intense feelings, such as anger, fear, hopelessness or depression. If you are feeling like this, remember that you are not alone and that your value as a person has not changed. It is okay to have these feelings, but if they are overwhelming, are going on for months, or are interfering with your everyday life, you may find counselling helpful.

It can take time to come to terms with finding out you have herpes. Take time for things that make you feel good. It may help to talk to a trusted person, such as a friend, relative, doctor, nurse or counsellor.

You may be wondering if you should tell your partner(s) and how you should do it. It is best to talk to your partners about your herpes status, but this is your decision to make. Telling partners helps them to make informed choices about their sexual health.

WHEN TO GET HELP

See your family doctor if you get frequent outbreaks (6 or more a year). You may want to talk about daily suppressive antiviral therapy. This involves taking a dose of medication every day to lower the frequency of outbreaks and asymptomatic shedding.

TO LEARN MORE ASK

- + Your health care provider.
- + HealthLinkBC - call 8-1-1 (7-1-1 for deaf or hard of hearing) or go online to www.HealthLinkBC.ca
- + Visit SmartSexResource.com/herpes for more information and resources on herpes, including suggestions for how to talk to partners.

RECOMMENDED FOLLOW UP

- Follow up with your primary care provider in ___ days.

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Find this information sheet on the BC Emergency Medicine Network website:

www.bcemn.ca/clinical_resource/herpes/