

HERPES

FACT SHEET

What is Herpes?

Herpes is a common infection caused by a virus. There are several different types of herpes virus. The most common types are herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV 1) and herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV 2).

HSV 1 usually causes sores around the lips or face, known as cold sores. HSV 2 usually causes blisters or sores around the genital area (including the bottom). It's generally a more severe infection, with fever and flu-like symptoms. However, both types of virus can cause infection on the face or genital area.

Most people who have herpes are not aware that they have the infection. This is because it doesn't always cause any symptoms when it enters the body. If symptoms are there they are often mistaken for chafing, a rash or some other minor discomfort.

The herpes virus stays in your body, even if you don't have any symptoms.

What are the symptoms of herpes?

The first herpes episode is usually the most severe, but it may occur days to years after the virus first enters your body. It can cause blisters, broken skin, itching, burning when passing urine or a discharge. It is often painful and you may have fever and a flu-like illness as well. It may be difficult to know for certain if you have herpes. If you have any symptoms like these it's a good idea to see a doctor.

How is herpes spread?

Herpes is passed on from one person to another by skin-to-skin contact. If there are any sores or blisters, a person is more likely to pass on herpes. Even if there are no symptoms, it can still be possible to pass on herpes to a partner through kissing, oral, vaginal or anal sex.

Remember if your partner has cold sores on the mouth you can get genital herpes through oral sex.

The use of condoms and dental dams decreases the risk of passing on herpes. It's strongly recommended that you use these to protect you and your partner from all sexually transmitted infections.

It is possible to have been exposed to herpes many years before having symptoms, the first episode doesn't mean it was passed on from a current partner.

How do I get tested for herpes?

If you have symptoms, your doctor can take a swab from the area and send it for testing. A positive swab result confirms that you have herpes.

A negative test may mean that you don't have the infection, or it may mean that the virus was not present on the skin when the swab was collected.

Although there is a blood test available, this will only tell you whether you have ever been exposed to a herpes virus. This could be oral or genital herpes and you may never have had or may never get any signs of the infection. It is not recommended to screen people who don't have any symptoms of herpes. If you want more information, please discuss this with a doctor.

How is herpes treated?

Most herpes episodes last three to seven days. Antiviral medication is available on prescription from a doctor. These tablets should be taken within the first three days of the symptoms appearing for best effect.

Local treatments (treatment to the affected area) may also help. These include:

- salt baths, this may help if your genital area is painful (1tsp to 2 cups water)
- aspirin, ibuprofens or paracetamol to help relieve pain
- acyclovir creams, like Zovirax, which can be used on the sores as soon as they appear
- topical anaesthetic such as lignocaine gel
- passing urine in a warm bath, if urinating is painful
- applying ice to the infected area to help relieve pain

In addition you can:

- wear cotton underwear and loose-fitting clothing to increase comfort and help healing
- drink plenty of water (at least 1.5 L per day) so the urine is diluted and doesn't sting as much
- rest to help recovery

Can symptoms come back?

Blisters can come back, usually in the same place. Recurrences are usually less severe and may become less frequent or stop over time.

Some people can tell when an episode of herpes is about to happen; they may feel tingling or pain in the affected skin or some other sign. This is the best time to start taking antiviral medication, as it may prevent a full episode from occurring. See your doctor, discuss your symptoms and have the medication on hand.

Sometimes, recurrent symptoms may be so mild that you only need local treatments.

For some people, herpes causes frequent and troubling episodes. These people can take medication regularly to prevent outbreaks. Discuss your treatment with a doctor.

If I have herpes how can I protect myself and others?

Herpes outbreaks are more common when you are unwell or stressed, like getting a cold sore when you have a cold. Keeping healthy, getting enough sleep and reducing the stresses in your life can make herpes attacks shorter, less severe and less frequent.

To reduce the risk of spreading the herpes virus to other people or to other places on your body, don't touch the herpes sores and, if you do, wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water immediately after.

Before you are sexually active, talk to your partner and decide together which protection suits you best. Ideally you should avoid sexual contact from the time you first experience any symptoms until the sore has completely healed (the scab has fallen off and there is new skin where the sore was).

Remember, it is possible to pass on the infection even if there are no obvious blisters, sores or other symptoms.

Condoms are an effective barrier to prevent infection *if they cover the infected area*. Suppressive therapy may also reduce the risk of passing on herpes to a regular partner.

Does herpes affect fertility or pregnancy?

Herpes does not affect fertility. There is a very low chance the virus can be passed on to babies during pregnancy and birth, this is most likely if the first episode occurs in late pregnancy. When you are pregnant it is important to tell your doctor or midwife that you have herpes.

Where can I get help and information?

Finding out you have genital herpes may make you feel anxious. Getting the right information about how it will affect you is important.

- You can contact a nurse on SHINE SA's Sexual Healthline.
- You can see a doctor at SHINE SA for further information, treatment and counselling that is confidential.

You can also:

- Make an appointment with your local doctor, health care provider or Aboriginal Health service.
- Contact Adelaide Sexual Health Centre: drop in or phone. 275 North Terrace, Adelaide
Tel: 7117 2800

CONTACT
SHINE SA

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Clinic & Counselling Appointments and General Enquiries

Tel 1300 794 584

Clinic locations and times are available at www.shinesa.org.au

Sexual Healthline

Tel 1300 883 793 **Country callers (toll free)** 1800 188 171

Talk to a sexual health nurse about any sexual health issue.

Available 9am – 12.30pm, Monday – Friday

National Relay Service

www.relayservice.gov.au

133 677 (TTY/Voice) 1300 555 727 (Speak & Listen) 0423 677 767 (SMS Relay)