



GENITAL HERPES

The Issue

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that can cause painful sores on and around the genital area. There is no cure for the condition, but medication can help ease symptoms.

Background

Herpes simplex virus, the virus that causes genital herpes, belongs to the same family of viruses that cause cold sores, chickenpox, shingles and other diseases. Genital herpes can be transmitted during vaginal, anal or oral sex even if the infected person has no open sores or any other symptoms of infection. Although it is rare, pregnant women can pass the infection onto their babies during or after birth.

Practising safer sex can help reduce the risk of getting or transmitting the infection.

Symptoms of Genital Herpes

Many people who have genital herpes are unaware that they have the virus because they have no symptoms, mild symptoms, or mistake the symptoms for other conditions such as jock itch, yeast infections, razor burn or allergic reactions to detergents. The only way to be sure whether or not you have genital herpes is to be tested.

Those with symptoms may experience a tingling sensation or itching in the genital area within two to twenty days of having sex with an infected person. A cluster of blisters may appear, which can burst, leaving painful sores often lasting two to three weeks. A fever, headache and muscular pain may occur during the first attack.

After the sores from the first attack heal, the virus goes into a dormant stage but recurrent

outbreaks can occur. Some people have only one or two recurrences in a lifetime, while others have them frequently. Recurrences are typically shorter in duration and less severe than the first episode. It is believed that stress can play a role in the frequency and severity of outbreaks. Herpes can continue to be transmitted to others, even between recurrences when the infected person has no symptoms.

Women's symptoms can include:

- Sores inside or near the vagina, the cervix, on the external genitals, near the anus or on the thighs or buttocks.
- Tender lumps in the groin (lymphadenopathy).

Men's symptoms can include:

- Sores on the penis, around the testicles, near the anus or on the thighs or buttocks.
- Tender lumps in the groin (lymphadenopathy).

For both men and women, the sores will usually occur at or near the site where the virus was transmitted.

The Health Risks of Genital Herpes

Pain and discomfort are the main health effects of genital herpes, but the virus can also cause emotional and social problems for those infected. There are now several antiviral drugs available to help prevent outbreaks and minimize the severity.

Transmission of the herpes simplex virus from an infected mother to her child during pregnancy or birth is rare. In some cases, herpes infection can be life-threatening to the



child; in other cases it may result in brain damage or skin lesions.

Minimizing Your Risk

Following these suggestions can help protect you from contracting genital herpes.

- Learn about safer sex methods and practise them.
- Make informed decisions about your sexual health. Talk to your partner(s) about their STI status and the use of protection.
- Avoid having sex when skin sores are present.
- Condom use reduces the risk of getting genital herpes and other STIs. However, when using a condom, remember that the exposed areas of skin are still unprotected. To prevent spread of the virus during oral sex use a condom on the penis and a dental dam over the female genital area.
- If you have had multiple sexual partners, have yourself tested for genital herpes and other STIs.

If you think you may have genital herpes:

- See your doctor as soon as possible. The doctor can prescribe medication to help ease the pain of the attack and control further attacks.
- If a diagnosis is confirmed, keep the infected area clean and dry.
- Inform your sex partner(s) of your infection so they are aware of the risk of infection. Couples where one partner is infected may benefit from counselling regarding the pros and cons of continuous condom use from a health care provider.

- Wear loose fitting clothing made of natural materials such as cotton to help ease symptoms.
- Do not have sex until the sores have healed.
- Always use a condom when having sex, even if you have no symptoms.

Health Canada's Role

Health Canada's Sexual Health and Sexually Transmitted Infections Section provides national leadership and coordination through programs that develop and support surveillance and targeted research studies. Working with the provincial and territorial governments, non-governmental organizations and health care providers, the Section develops evidence-based national standards and policies, promotes the exchange of information and engages in prevention and promotion activities.

Need More Info?

For more information on genital herpes, talk to your doctor or visit your local public health clinic. You can also find helpful information on genital herpes, other STIs, and sexual health at the following websites:

What you need to know about STI: Genital herpes
http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/std-mts/sti_k.html

Sexual Health and Sexually Transmitted Infections
<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/std-mts/index.html>

Where to go for help
http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/std-mts/sti_t.html

STI Helpline Telephone Numbers
http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/std-mts/phone_e.html

For more information on genital herpes, see the Canadian Health Network and click on Sexuality/Reproductive Health and search for herpes
<http://www.canadian-health-network.ca/>

For tips on safer sex practices go to Health Canada's Condoms, Sexually transmitted infections, Safer Sex and You Web site at:
http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/epiu-aepi/std-mts/condom_e.html

For information on STIs directed at youth go to the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada's sexuality and you Teen Web site at:
<http://www.sexualityandu.ca/eng/teens/STI/index.cfm>

For more information on common STIs and tips on prevention go to the College of Family Physicians of Canada's Web site at:
<http://www.cfpc.ca/English/cfpc/programs/patient%20education/sti/default.asp?s=1>

For additional articles on Health and Safety issues go to the It's Your Health Web site at:
www.healthcanada.ca/iyh
 You can also call (613) 957-2991