

Herpes Simplex Virus Fact Sheet

What is oral herpes?

HSV-1 often causes oral herpes, which can result in cold sores or fever blisters on or around the mouth. However, most people with oral herpes do not have any symptoms. Most people with oral herpes get it during childhood or young adulthood from non-sexual contact with saliva.

What is genital herpes?

[Genital herpes](#) is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by two types of viruses – herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) and herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2).

Is there a link between oral herpes and genital herpes?

- HSV-1 is often called the cold sore virus and HSV-2 is known as the genital herpes virus; however, either type can be in either location.
- Oral herpes caused by HSV-1 can spread from the mouth to the genitals through [oral sex](#), so some cases of genital herpes are due to HSV-1.
- You can have one type of herpes and still get the second type. For example, you can get HSV-1 on your mouth during childhood, and still get HSV-2 on your genitals years later through sexual contact.
- It is rare to get the same type of herpes on two different areas of the body. This means that if you have HSV-1 on the mouth, it is unlikely you will get HSV-1 sores on the genitals.

How is herpes spread?

- You can get genital and/or oral herpes by having vaginal, anal, or oral sex with someone who has the infection. You can get herpes if you have contact with:
 - a herpes sore
 - saliva from a partner with an oral herpes infection
 - genital fluids from a partner with a genital herpes infection
 - skin in the oral area of a partner with oral herpes or
 - skin in the genital area of a partner with genital herpes.
- You also can get genital herpes from a sex partner who does not have a visible sore or is unaware of their infection. It is also possible to get genital herpes if you receive oral sex from a partner with oral herpes.
- There is no risk of passing herpes through general household activities. You can't get herpes from a toilet seat or furniture, or from sharing a bed or hugging someone with herpes. The herpes virus is fragile and does not live more than a few minutes on most surfaces. The virus is easily killed by soap and water. Unless an item like lipstick, a spoon or a towel, is going directly from one person's mouth or genitals to another person, there is no need to worry about sharing household items.

How do I know if I have herpes?

- Most people with genital herpes have no symptoms or have very mild symptoms. Mild symptoms may go unnoticed or be mistaken for other skin conditions like a pimple or ingrown hair. Because of this, most people do not know they have a herpes infection.
- Herpes sores usually appear as one or more blisters on or around the genitals, rectum or mouth. This is known as having an "outbreak." The blisters break and leave painful sores that may take a week or more to heal. Flu-like symptoms (e.g., fever, body aches, or swollen glands) also may occur during the first outbreak.

- People who experience an initial outbreak of herpes can have repeated outbreaks, especially if they have HSV-2. However, repeat outbreaks are usually shorter and less severe than the first outbreak. Although genital herpes is a lifelong infection, the number of outbreaks may decrease over time.

How will my healthcare provider know if I have herpes?

- Your healthcare provider may diagnose herpes by simply looking at any sores that are present. Providers can also take a sample from the sore(s) and test it. If sores are not present, a blood test may be used to look for HSV antibodies.
- A herpes blood test can help determine if you have herpes infection. It cannot tell you who gave you the infection or when you got the infection.

What is the link between herpes and HIV?

- Herpes infection can cause sores or breaks in the skin or lining of the mouth, vagina, and rectum and makes it easier for a person to get infected with HIV.
- Having both HIV and herpes increases the chance of spreading HIV to a HIV-negative partner during oral, vagina, or anal sex.

How can I prevent herpes?

- The only way to completely avoid STIs is to not have vaginal, anal, or oral sex.
- If you are sexually active, you can do the following things to lower your chances of getting herpes:
 - Be in a long-term relationship with one partner who does not have herpes.
 - Use condoms [the right way](#) every time you have sex.
 - Be aware that not all herpes sores occur in areas that a condom can cover. Also, the skin can release the virus (shed) from areas that do not have a visible herpes sore. For these reasons, condoms *may not* fully protect you from getting herpes.
- If your sex partner(s) has/have herpes, you can lower your risk of getting it if:
 - Your partner takes an anti-herpes medicine every day. This is something your partner should discuss with his or her healthcare provider.
 - You avoid having vaginal, anal, or oral sex when your partner has herpes symptoms (i.e., during an “outbreak”).

Is there a cure for herpes?

There is no cure for herpes. However, there are medicines that can prevent or shorten outbreaks. A daily anti-herpes medicine can make it less likely to pass the infection on to your sex partner(s).

What happens if I don't receive treatment?

- Herpes can cause painful sores and can be severe in people with suppressed immune systems.
- If you touch your sores or fluids from the sores, you may transfer herpes to another body part like your eyes so do not touch the sores or fluids.
- If you do touch the sores or fluids, quickly wash your hands thoroughly to help avoid spreading the infection.

I'm pregnant. How could genital herpes affect my baby?

- It is important that you avoid getting genital herpes during pregnancy. Tell your healthcare provider if you have ever had a genital herpes diagnosis or symptoms or possible exposure.

- If you are pregnant, there can be problems for you and your unborn fetus, or newborn baby. See "[I'm pregnant. How could genital herpes affect my baby?](#)" for information.
- Prenatal care visits are very important. Some research suggests that a genital herpes infection may lead to miscarriage or make it more likely to deliver your baby too early.
- You can pass herpes to your unborn child before birth, but it more commonly passes during delivery. This can lead to a deadly infection in your baby (called neonatal herpes).
- If you have genital herpes, you may need to take anti-herpes medicine towards the end of your pregnancy. This medicine may reduce your risk of having signs or symptoms of genital herpes when you deliver.
- At the time of delivery, your healthcare provider should carefully examine you for herpes sores. If you have signs or symptoms of genital herpes at delivery, a 'C-section' is likely to occur.

May I breastfeed my baby when I have a herpes outbreak?

- The herpes virus cannot be passed to a baby through breast milk. However, the baby could get infected by touching a sore on your body. Make sure any sores that the baby could come into contact with are covered when you hold your baby or while breastfeeding.
- Wash your hands with soap and water before and after feeding your baby.
- If you have sores on your breast, you should not breastfeed your baby from that breast until the sores have healed.

Can I still have sex if I have herpes?

- If you have herpes, you should talk to your sex partner(s) about their risk.
- Using [condoms and dental dams](#) may help lower this risk but it will not get rid of the risk completely. Having sores or other symptoms of herpes can increase your risk of spreading the disease. Even if you do not have any symptoms, you can still infect your sex partners.
- While herpes is not curable, it is important to know that it is manageable with medicine. Daily suppressive therapy (i.e., daily use of antiviral medication) can lower your risk of spreading the virus to others.
- You may have concerns about how genital herpes will impact your health, sex life, and relationships: [Herpes: A Patient's Guide](#) will answer many of your questions
- A genital herpes diagnosis may affect how you will feel about current or future sexual relationships. Knowing how to [talk to your partner about STIs](#) is important.
- Talk to a healthcare provider about your concerns and treatment options.

References: Adapted from CDC [Genital Herpes: A Basic Fact Sheet](#)
 BCCDC [Herpes: A Patient's Guide](#)
 BCCDC [Herpes: A Health Care Provider's Guide](#)

Other questions? Talk to your health care provider or call our Sexual Health & Harm Reduction Program at 613-966-5500 or Toll Free 1-800-267-2803 | TTY Dial 711 (1-800-267-6511) | <https://www.hpepublichealth.ca/>

Public Health is committed to providing accessible programs and services to all. To request this or any other publication in an alternative format, please contact us by phone at 613-966-5500 or by email at accessibility@hpeph.ca