



# Herpes

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## What is herpes?

Genital herpes is caused by sexually transmitted viruses called herpes simplex. Herpes is extremely common: as many as 1 out of every 5 people in the United States is infected with the virus that causes ano-genital herpes, and only about 20% of those who are infected know they have it. Both men and women can get herpes.

## How is herpes spread?

Herpes is spread through direct, skin-to-skin contact with an infected person. Often the contact occurs during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. A person with a cold sore can pass herpes to the mouth of a sex partner by kissing, or to the genitals of a sex partner during oral sex. Herpes virus may be shed from the skin even without blisters or sores, therefore it may be passed even when the skin looks normal.

It is especially easy to contract the virus if there is direct contact with sores, but it is also possible to become infected even if no sores are present on an infected partner.

## What are the symptoms of herpes sores?

When experienced, symptoms of herpes may include repeated outbreaks of painful blisters or sores on the skin that scab over and heal without scars. Blisters may also be hidden in the vagina. During your first herpes outbreak, you may also experience swollen glands, muscle aches, headache, fever, and pain or difficulty during urination. This first outbreak usually occurs 2 to 12 days after infection. Blisters or sores may return periodically but are usually less severe and heal more quickly than the first outbreak. Recurrent outbreaks may begin with itching or burning on the skin in the area where blisters or sores are about to appear.

## How will I know if I have herpes?

Your doctor or other health-care provider will collect a sample of fluid with a small swab or take a scraping from a blister or sore during an exam and have it tested at a laboratory. Some facilities may be able to diagnose herpes using blood tests.

## How is herpes treated?

There are medications that can shorten herpes outbreaks, relieve discomfort, and make transmission less likely. Medication can also be taken on a daily basis to decrease the number of outbreaks a person has.

Although herpes outbreaks are treatable, there is no cure for the herpes virus infection.

## What happens if herpes is left untreated?

Discomfort and inconvenience are usually the worst problems associated with herpes. People with a weakened immune system, such as those with advanced HIV infection, may have more severe outbreaks and complications.

Like other STDs, if left untreated, herpes can increase a person's chance of getting or spreading HIV. If you have symptoms, get examined as soon as possible to avoid any complications and discuss treatment options.

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## Herpes, Continued

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### Do I need to tell my sex partners?

Yes. If you're diagnosed with herpes, it's important to tell everyone you've recently had sex with, so they can be examined for signs of herpes.

### What if I'm pregnant?

A woman with herpes can have a normal, healthy, uninfected baby, but only if precautions are taken. Herpes during pregnancy can cause premature labor and miscarriage. It can also cause blindness, brain damage, or even death in a newborn baby. If either you or your partner has herpes and you are pregnant, it is very important that you tell your doctor or other health-care provider.

All pregnant women should be tested for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, as early as possible in pregnancy. You should be tested again during your pregnancy if you are at higher risk for getting an STD. For example, you are at higher risk if you have a new partner during pregnancy, or if you have more than one partner. If left untreated, STDs can be devastating for your baby. To protect yourself and your baby against HIV and other STDs, use a latex condom whenever you have sex.

### How can I avoid herpes?

Latex condoms may be helpful in preventing the spread of genital herpes, but only when the infected area is covered or protected by the condom. If there is contact with an open sore, herpes can be transmitted to areas not protected by a condom. A person with herpes should not have sex when a herpes sore is present on the mouth, genitals, anus, or buttocks.

All sexually transmitted infections can be avoided by not having sex. *If you are sexually active*, you can reduce your risk of getting most other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, by having sex only in a mutually monogamous relationship with a partner you are sure is not infected. If you are having sex outside of such a relationship, you can reduce your risk of STDs by:

- 1) *Always using a latex condom (or other type of latex barrier) whenever you have sex – vaginal, anal, or oral.* Condoms made of “natural” materials, such as lambskin, protect against pregnancy, but not against STDs. If you are allergic to latex, you can use condoms made of polyurethane or other synthetic materials.
- 2) *Limiting the number of people you have sex with.*  
The more partners you have, the higher your risk.
- 3) *Avoiding alcohol and drugs when you have sex.* Drinking or getting high makes it much harder to remember to use condoms to protect yourself and others. For free, confidential help with a substance abuse problem, call 1-800-LIFENET (1-800-543-3638), or just call 311.

### More information

Free, confidential STD exams and treatment, and confidential or anonymous HIV counseling and testing, are available at Health Department clinics in all 5 boroughs of New York City. Health insurance, proof of citizenship, and parental consent are NOT required. For a list of clinics and hours, visit [nyc.gov/health](http://nyc.gov/health), or call 311.



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