



Pharmaceutical  
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# Genital Herpes

**Genital herpes is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections in Australia. It is caused by the herpes simplex virus, the same virus that can cause cold sores on the face. Antiviral medicines may relieve symptoms, speed healing, limit recurrences and protect against spread to others**

There are two types of the herpes simplex virus, called HSV-1 and HSV-2.

HSV-1 is a more common cause of cold sores and HSV-2 is a more common cause of genital herpes, but both types can cause both forms of infection.

Once a person has been infected with herpes simplex, it remains in their body for life. After an initial episode of infection, the virus lies dormant in nerve cells and may reactivate from time to time.

## Symptoms

Many people have no obvious symptoms and are unaware that they have genital herpes. Some people have one initial episode (outbreak) of symptoms after becoming infected, then no further episodes. Others have recurring episodes of symptoms. Recurring episodes are caused by reactivation of herpes virus already present in the body.

When present, symptoms of genital herpes may include:

- Flu-like symptoms (e.g., feeling unwell, headaches, muscular aches, swollen glands)
- Skin redness or irritation around the genital area

- Itchiness, tingling or soreness around the genital area
- Painful lesions (similar to cold sores) on or near the genitals, anus, buttocks or thighs. The lesions start as small blisters which break open to form shallow, painful sores, then scab over and heal after one to two weeks.

Symptoms are usually the most severe during the initial episode. Further outbreaks are often less painful and shorter lasting. Outbreaks may recur for years, but may become milder and less frequent over time.

Triggers for recurring episodes may include:

- Stress
- Hormone changes (e.g., menstruation)
- Poor nutrition
- Alcohol
- Illness
- Surgery
- Exposure to UV light (e.g., sunlight)
- Friction, such as that caused by sexual intercourse.

## How is it spread?

Genital herpes spreads through skin-to-skin contact and can be spread by most forms of sexual contact. It is also possible for a person with a cold sore to transfer herpes to their partner's genitals and for a person with genital herpes to transfer the virus to their partner's face.

Contact with herpes lesions carries the greatest risk of infection and sexual contact should be avoided until all lesions have fully healed. Sometimes, however, the virus can also be passed on when no lesions are present.

## Important

If you are concerned that you may have genital herpes, it is best to consult a doctor when symptoms are present. A doctor can then arrange a special test for the herpes virus. Genital herpes blisters are cold sores in the genital area and need not be a cause for shame or guilt, or a serious barrier to relationships. Genital herpes counselling services are available. Ask a doctor or pharmacist.

A mother may pass the herpes virus to her baby during the baby's birth. Women who are pregnant or planning to become pregnant are advised to tell their doctors about their herpes, so the risks to the baby can be minimised.

Herpes simplex is a fragile virus that does not survive for long outside the human body. There have been no proven cases of genital herpes being spread through toilet seats, towels or other things used by an infected person.

## Medicines

Genital herpes can be managed with antiviral medicines and pain relieving medicines.

**Antiviral medicines** (e.g., famciclovir, valaciclovir, aciclovir)

- A short course of antiviral medicine started as soon as possible (preferably less than 12 hours and no later than 72 hours) after an outbreak of symptoms can relieve symptoms and speed healing.
- A continuous daily dose of antiviral medicine can reduce the number and severity of outbreaks and reduce the chance of transmitting genital herpes to a sex partner.

Antiviral medicines must be prescribed by a doctor.

## Self care

Ways to keep lesions clean and dry and to relieve discomfort include:

- Expose the lesions to warm, dry air for 10-15 minutes several times a day
- Bathe the lesions with salt water (saline) – use 2 teaspoons of salt per litre of water
- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine light coloured and dilute (unless advised not to by a doctor)
- Urinate while genitals are in warm water, if urination is painful. Women may stop urine touching the lesions by separating the lips of the vulva while sitting on the toilet
- Wear loose, cotton underpants and avoid tight trousers
- Avoid using soap, shower gel or bubble bath on the affected skin.

Ways to reduce the risk of catching or passing on herpes include:

- Limit your sexual activity to the one, same partner
- Use condoms (male or female), even when there are no lesions, as it is possible to pass on the infection even when no symptoms are present
- Avoid all sexual contact while you or your partner have an outbreak (any symptoms) of genital herpes or cold sores
- Never share sex toys without thoroughly cleaning them first
- Avoid touching lesions and wash your hands well after any contact.

The use of condoms during oral, vaginal and anal sex protects only those areas in contact with the condom. People with herpes are encouraged to tell their sex partner, so that both of you can decide what precautions to take.

## Related fact cards

- *Cold Sores*
- *Pain Relievers*
- *Relaxation Techniques*

## For more information

**Australian Herpes Management Forum** – website [www.ahmf.com.au](http://www.ahmf.com.au)

**HEALTHInsite** – website [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

**New Zealand Dermatological Society Inc** – website [www.dermnetnz.org](http://www.dermnetnz.org)

**Sexual health clinics** – listed under 'S' in the white pages of the phone book.

**Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia** – website [www.shfpa.org.au](http://www.shfpa.org.au)

**Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)** leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

**NPS Medicines Line** – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

**The Poisons Information Centre** – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

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