

Genital herpes

Overview

Genital herpes is very common condition, caused by the same family of viruses that cause cold sores, chicken pox and shingles.

Genital herpes can be one of the most distressing STIs.

It is usually transmitted through vaginal, oral and anal sex. Sometimes there are few or mild symptoms such as itching and burning but it can cause tell-tale blisters on the genitals or thighs and pain in the genital area. It can also cause fever, tiredness and swollen glands.

The frequency and severity of genital herpes outbreaks can vary greatly from person to person.

A very common STI

Genital herpes is also one of the most common sexually transmitted infections (STIs) worldwide.

It is estimated that 1 in 8 Australian adults have genital herpes, up to 70% of those are unaware they have the infection. This raises the risk of unintentional transmission.

Two main types

There are 2 types of herpes simplex virus (HSV) - Herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) and Herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2).

HSV-1 is usually responsible for cold sores, while HSV-2 is usually responsible for genital herpes.

Either herpes simplex virus on the genitals is called 'genital herpes' so both HSV1 and HSV2 can cause this.

There is no cure for herpes but it can be treated with anti-viral drugs. Treatment can decrease outbreaks and ease symptoms.

Other ways its spread

One of the major misconceptions about this virus is that, unlike some other STIs, unprotected sexual intercourse or penetration is the only way to spread the infection.

Any sexual activity that involves contact with infected parts of the body, for example oral sex with a cold sore, can be a risk.

People are most infectious when the condition is active - that is they have lesions or sores on the genital area, but the virus may be passed on at other times too.

Causes

Genital herpes is caused by the herpes simplex virus type 1 or 2 (HSV 1, or HSV-2). Sexual intercourse, kissing, anal sex and oral sex are the main methods of transmission of herpes from one person to another. In rare instances, herpes can also be passed from mother to infant during childbirth.

One of the major problems associated with this disease is that many people do not even know they have it. After the first outbreak, especially if it is mild, the infection becomes dormant in the body, and people can be symptom-free.

It was thought that people were only infectious when the disease was active (that is, when they had lesions, blisters or other symptoms), but recent research now suggests

that people with herpes may be contagious even if their disease is dormant and there are no apparent symptoms.

Once you have genital herpes, you have it for life. There is no cure, although there are treatments available to help manage and prevent outbreaks.

Once you have the disease, outbreaks may occur regularly, or rarely. These can be caused by:

- Tiredness, stress, menstruation.
- Impaired immunity.
- No reason.

Symptoms

Genital herpes may be a mild to very painful condition that causes inflamed and irritated sores in the genital area. In addition to physical symptoms, the condition can also cause psychological distress.

The first outbreak of the infection is usually the worst. Some people will have minimal or no symptoms, but others may find it very debilitating. A primary infection is where someone is infected with any HSV for the first time. Symptoms of primary infection include:

- Fever.
- Aches and pains.
- Headache, often severe.
- Fatigue.
- Ulcers or fluid-filled blisters. These are commonly known as herpes vesicles, and can be found around the genital and anal area, as well as the inner thighs and sometimes the buttocks. These vesicles ulcerate before forming crusts, which dry and heal, usually over a 3 week period.
- Sore and inflamed glands.
- Painful urination.
- Pain during sexual intercourse.
- Aseptic meningitis.
- Lower back pain.
- Difficulty defecating.

It is important to remember that infection can occur whenever there is contact between genital areas, even if a condom is worn.

After the primary infection, outbreaks usually involve less severe symptoms, and these are preceded by burning pain and/or tingling sensations in the genital/anal area.

Treatment options

Once a diagnosis of genital herpes has been confirmed, it is important to consider the implications in consultation with your doctor. It can be overwhelming to consider the prospect of an infection that has no cure. With management however, HSV may have minimal impact on your future health and sexual activity.

Any management plan will need to include a treatment regime, information about practicing safe sex and strategies to prevent future outbreaks.

In the beginning it may be highly stressful, and your doctor may suggest counselling to help adjust to your condition. In addition to this,

treatment is designed to:

- Treat pain, inflammation and prevent secondary infections in areas that have active lesions or sores.
- Relieve symptoms such as painful urination or difficulty opening the bowels.
- Reduce the length and severity of an outbreak. Anti-viral drugs are effective in achieving this outcome.

Some patients who have frequent or severe outbreaks may be candidates for ongoing anti-viral treatment, which is taken every day to reduce this risk.

In addition to drug therapy and pain relief, other simple measures can be taken that may help address the discomfort of active symptoms. These include:

- Cool compresses on affected areas.
- Cool baths.
- Application of local anaesthetic gels to affected areas.
- Keep the genital area dry after bathing.
- Wearing cotton underwear and avoiding tight clothing during active infections.
- Get plenty of rest to promote a healthy immune system.

It is important to talk to your doctor if you have genital herpes and are planning to become pregnant. The large majority of women with the condition can have a normal pregnancy, and normal delivery. If have a new diagnosis of genital herpes while you are pregnant the birth may need to be carefully managed and a caesarean section may be required

Lifestyle and diet

A diagnosis of genital herpes does not need to be a devastating blow. With a good treatment plan, and a focus on maintaining a healthy lifestyle, it can be managed.

It is very important to be open and honest with any sexual partners about the condition, and to practice safe sex at all times. It is advisable to avoid all skin-to-skin contact when your infection is active. You should wait until all sores have healed before resuming this type of contact.

Condoms are an important weapon against sexually transmitted infections, including genital herpes. There are also other products you can use to reduce risk, such as dental dams, which help to reduce exposure to the virus having oral sex. Talk to your doctor or sexual health care clinic about this.

A healthy diet, plenty of exercise and minimising alcohol will all help.

Support and resources online

- National Herpes Information Line www.herpes.com.au
- Australian Herpes Management Forum (AHMF) www.ahmf.com.au
- The Facts Australia www.thefacts.com.au
- Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia has links to all family planning centres in each state and territory www.shfpa.org.au