

Patient Education Guide

Prepared by:
DAVID S. REITMAN, MD
Children's National Medical Center

Questions— and Answers— About Genital Herpes Simplex Virus Infection

Your doctor has just told you that you have a herpes simplex virus infection (herpes). Most teens have a lot of questions about herpes. This guide will help answer some of them for you.

How did I get herpes?

Most cases of herpes are transmitted through sexual contact with another person who has the infection. This contact can be through sexual intercourse, oral sex, or anal sexual contact. If you have more than one sexual partner, it is often difficult to know which person gave you the infection. However, your doctor may be able to do some tests to determine whether this is a new infection or a recurrent outbreak.

Is there a cure for herpes?

Unfortunately, there is no cure for herpes. After your initial outbreak resolves, the virus “goes to sleep” in the nerves that attach to the skin in the genital area. However, it can “wake up” at almost any time and cause another outbreak. It is very difficult to predict *when* you might have an outbreak—or how many outbreaks you might have. Most people report that the number of outbreaks decreases over time.

What can I do to prevent an outbreak?

If you are having many outbreaks, your doctor can prescribe an antiviral medication that will reduce the number of outbreaks you experience. The medicine can also make the outbreaks that do occur less severe.

What do I do if I get an outbreak?

Contact your doctor as soon as possible. Many doctors will give their patients a prescription for antiviral medication so that it can be readily available if an outbreak does occur. The medication is most effective if it is taken within the first 24 to 48 hours—so don't wait to start taking it.

What kinds of things might cause a herpes outbreak?

Triggers differ from one person to another, and it is difficult to predict what your triggers are unless you see a pattern related to the outbreaks. Some common triggers are stress, fever, trauma to the genital area (eg, during sexual activity), and menstruation or other hormonal changes.

Is it true that condoms don't protect against spreading herpes?

Aside from abstinence, condoms provide the best protection for you and your partner against the spread of herpes. However, keep in mind that the condom must cover the area where you usually get an outbreak. For example, if a male has outbreaks along the shaft of the penis, a condom can protect a future partner. But if the outbreaks generally occur over his thighs or scrotum, then the condom may not be as effective because it won't cover those areas adequately.

If I have herpes, can I still have children?

YES! Many people with genital herpes are also parents. A female with herpes *can* get pregnant and deliver a perfectly healthy baby. It is important that you discuss this with your doctor when you begin to consider your plans for pregnancy. This way, you and your doctor can take all the necessary precautions to ensure a safe, healthy pregnancy and delivery.