

DESCRIPTION

Herpes is the name of a group of viruses that cause painful blisters and sores. One kind of herpes (herpes simplex virus or HSV) causes both cold sores around the mouth and genital herpes (herpes around the sexual organs.)

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- While most people have a very painful primary infection, some people have very mild symptoms or no symptoms at all and may not even know they are infected.
- Early symptoms may include itching or burning in the genital or anal area. This may be followed by pain. Women may also have vaginal discharge.
- First episode may be accompanied by flu-like symptoms, difficult or painful urination, swollen lymph glands, and fever.
- Within a few days, sores appear in the vaginal area, on the penis, around the anal opening, on the thighs or buttocks, or on the mouth. The sores start as red bumps then turn into blisters, which open and become painful. They then crust over and heal without leaving a scar.
- Symptoms can recur since the virus permanently remains in the body. Future outbreaks are usually milder than the initial outbreak. For some, outbreaks may occur several times a year while others may have only one or two outbreaks in their lifetime.

CAUSES

Genital herpes is most commonly spread by having intercourse, anal or oral sex with someone who is having a herpes outbreak. An outbreak is a period of active herpes infection that usually causes visible sores in or around the genital area. The sores shed the virus that can infect another person. Sometimes, a person may have an outbreak with no visible sores. They can still shed the virus and infect the other person. Herpes enters the body through a break in your skin or through the skin of your mouth, penis or vagina, urinary tract, cervix, anus and sometimes the nose or eyes. Herpes can also be spread from mother to baby during childbirth.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

It is very important to use a condom every time you have sex, even if you, or your partner, do not show any symptoms of genital herpes. Latex condoms that cover the infected area can help reduce the risk of transmission. However, any affected areas not covered by the condom are still highly infectious (even if there are no visible sores). If either partner has blisters or sores; sexual intercourse, oral or anal sex and all skin-to-skin contact should be avoided. It is important to communicate with your sexual partner(s) in order to prevent further spread of infection.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

There is no cure for genital herpes because the virus lives in the affected person forever. During symptom-free periods, the virus returns to its dormant (inactive) state. Symptoms recur when the virus is reactivated.

GENERAL MEASURES

- Your health care provider can usually diagnose the disorder by an exam of the affected area.
- Laboratory studies may include blood tests or a culture of the fluid taken from the sores.
- Treatment goals are relieving your current symptoms and preventing future outbreaks.
- For self-care, keep the affected area clean and dry. Avoid touching the sores, but if you do, wash your hands right away.
- Wear loose-fitting clothes and cotton underwear.
- Warm baths with a tablespoon of salt added can ease some of the discomfort.
- Certain "triggers" can lead to outbreaks. They include skin friction, sex, stress, sunlight/sunburn, wind, fever, surgery, menstruation, infection, and some medications. A person will begin to recognize their triggers and take steps to avoid them.
- If you are pregnant and have herpes, be sure to tell your obstetric provider so proper steps can be taken to protect the baby.

MEDICATIONS

Oral antiviral medications are often prescribed for treatment and suppression of outbreaks. A topical form is available, but it is not as effective. Long-term suppressive therapy will be managed by your primary care physician or OB-GYN. Over the counter pain medications, such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen, may help reduce the discomfort and relieve fever.

SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION IF:

- Your symptoms do not improve after 7-10 days of treatment.