

## GENITAL HERPES

### What is herpes?

Herpes is a common infection caused by a virus. There are several different types of herpes virus. The most common types are herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV 1) and herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV 2).

HSV 1 usually causes sores around the lips or face, known as cold sores. The symptoms are generally milder than HSV 2.

HSV 2 usually causes blisters or sores around the genital area. It's generally a more severe infection, with fever and flu-like symptoms.

However, both types of virus infection can occur on the face or genital area.

### How common is herpes?

Herpes is very common. ***Most people who have herpes are not aware that they have the infection.*** This is because it doesn't always cause any symptoms when it enters the body. The symptoms are often mistaken for chafing, a rash or some other minor discomfort. The herpes virus stays in your system, even if you don't have any symptoms.

### How can I get herpes?

Herpes is passed on from one person to another by skin-to-skin contact. If any sores or blisters are present, a person is more likely to pass on herpes. Even if there are no symptoms, it can be possible to pass on herpes to a partner through kissing, oral, vaginal or anal sex.

Remember if your partner has cold sores on the lips you can get genital herpes through oral sex.

### How do I know if I have herpes?

The first herpes outbreak is usually the most severe, but it may occur days to years after the virus first enters your body. It can cause a rash, blisters, broken skin or itching and sometimes it can cause pain with no obvious skin change. It's often difficult to know for certain if you have herpes.

Herpes often causes blisters anywhere below your waist, including your bottom, not only in the genital area. These can be painful and usually come back in the same place each time. If you have any symptoms like these it's a good idea to see a doctor.

### How do I get tested for herpes?

If you have unusual or painful blisters your doctor can take a swab from the area and send it for testing. A positive swab result confirms that you have herpes.

**A negative test may mean either that you don't have the infection or that the virus was not present on the skin by the time the swab was collected. Sometimes the swab test may need to be repeated.**

Although there are blood tests available, this will only tell you whether you have ever been infected with a herpes virus. This could be either oral or genital herpes and you may never have had or may never get any signs of the infection. If you want more information, please discuss this with a doctor.

### How is herpes treated?

Many herpes infections last three to seven days and symptoms may be so mild that you may only need minimal or no treatment.

Local treatments include:

- Aqueous iodine antiseptic (Betadine) that you can buy from a chemist will dry out any blisters and help to prevent any other skin infections
- Salt baths may help if your genital area is painful
- aspirin or paracetamol will help to relieve pain
- acyclovir creams, like Zovirax, can be used on the sores as soon as they appear
- applying ice to the infected area to relieve pain

You can also help the healing process and reduce your discomfort by wearing cotton underwear and loose-fitting clothing.

For severe and recurrent attacks, antiviral medication is available on prescription from a doctor. The tablets need to be taken at the beginning of an outbreak. Some people can tell when an outbreak of herpes is about to happen: they may feel tingling or pain in the affected skin or some other sign. This is the best time to start taking the tablets, as it may prevent a full outbreak from occurring. See your doctor, discuss your symptoms and have the medication on hand.

Occasionally people who have herpes get frequent, troubling outbreaks. For these people medication can be prescribed and taken regularly to prevent herpes outbreaks. If you feel that this is the case please discuss your treatment with a doctor.

### How can I protect myself from getting herpes?

The use of condoms and dams decreases the risk of passing on herpes. It's strongly recommended that you use condoms or dams to protect you and your partner from all sexually transmitted infections.

If you or your partner have any unusual or painful blisters, ulcers or a rash anywhere below the waist then it's important that you see a doctor to check if these could be herpes before skin-to-skin contact.

### If I have herpes how can I protect myself and others?

Like getting a cold sore then you have a cold, herpes outbreaks are more common when you are unwell or stressed. Keeping healthy, getting enough sleep and reducing the stresses in your life can make herpes attacks shorter, less severe and less frequent.

To reduce the risk of spreading the herpes virus to other people or to other places on your body don't touch the herpes sores and, if you do, wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water immediately after.

Before you are sexually active, discuss your situation with your partner and decide together on the protection which suits you best. Ideally you should avoid sexual contact from the time you first experience any symptoms until the sore has completely healed (the scab has fallen off and there is new skin where the sore was).

Condoms are an effective barrier to prevent infection if they cover the infected area. It's important to use water-based lubricants to prevent the condom breaking. It also makes sex more comfortable and pleasurable.

You can also use dental dams. These are a very thin, square of rubber that's used to cover genitals. They are used when giving oral or digital sex. Dams can protect both partners from herpes if the dam covers the infected area.

### Will herpes affect my fertility?

Herpes does not affect fertility in men or women. It doesn't effect women during pregnancy. It rarely affects babies at birth. If you have your first severe signs of herpes during the pregnancy it is more likely that the baby may be affected. When you are pregnant it is important to advise your doctor or midwife that you have had herpes.

### For more information.....

- please call our Client Information &

Support Service 8948-0144

- or NT HEALTH INFO LINE  
1800 186 026
- or visit [www.fpahealth.org.au](http://www.fpahealth.org.au)

**Practising safe sex reduces the risk of contracting other sexually transmissible infections (STI's) and HIV**

IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY FAMILY PLANNING CAN BE FOUND AT:

*Darwin Head Office*  
Unit 2, The Clock Tower,  
Dick Ward Drive  
Coconut Grove  
Telephone: (08) 89480144

*Alice Springs*  
Telephone: (08) 8953 0288

*Clinics only at:*  
Palmerston Community Care Centre  
Telephone: (08) 8948 0144

Katherine Community Care Centre  
Telephone: (08) 8971 3153

## GENITAL HERPES

### MISSION STATEMENT

*Family Planning Welfare Association of the NT exists to provide quality health care and education services in sexual and reproductive health.*

Admin/ Clinics/ Pamphlets\_Info/ Genital Herpes  
January 2007

**Family Planning**  
Welfare Association of NT Inc.