

The facts about genital herpes

CONDITION FACT SHEET

■ What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is a common sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the herpes simplex virus – the same virus that also causes oral cold sores. One in eight Australian adults over the age of 25 years has the virus that causes genital herpes.

There are two types of herpes simplex virus that can cause genital herpes:

- Type 1 (HSV-1) is carried by around 70% of adults in developed countries and in the past has mostly caused cold sores.
- Type 2 (HSV-2) is carried by 12.5% of the population and is generally associated with genital herpes.

As oral sex has become more common, the traditional distinctions between the two strains are breaking down and both types of herpes simplex virus can cause genital herpes.

■ What are the symptoms?

Genital herpes affects each person differently, and the symptoms can vary from severe to none at all.

Common signs you may experience leading up to an outbreak include tingling, itching and discomfort in the genital region, followed by symptoms such as a rash and blisters or lesions that burst and turn into ulcers. Some people also experience a fever, and pain in their back and buttocks.

However, not all outbreaks have such obvious symptoms. Many people don't realise they have genital herpes, often dismissing their symptoms as common conditions such as thrush. This highlights the importance of discussing any recurrent symptoms with a doctor.

The first outbreak of genital herpes is usually the most uncomfortable, and

occurs around four to seven days after sexual exposure. It can last for up to 20 days, but the good news is that future outbreaks tend to be less severe and less painful. This is because your body develops antibodies which will help fight future outbreaks.

Once you have experienced a few outbreaks, you may be able to identify lifestyle factors which may trigger another outbreak.

These triggers may vary from person to person, however stress is one that is commonly reported. Other factors believed to trigger a genital herpes outbreak include menstruation, illness, sex and feeling run down, perhaps due to a lack of sleep.

While you may be able to control some of these triggers, it is unlikely that you will be able to completely eliminate them from your life. Therefore, it is important that you speak with your doctor and develop an ongoing management plan to help reduce future outbreaks.

■ How can I reduce the risk of spreading the infection?

Genital herpes can be transmitted from one person to another through any form of sexual contact. This includes vaginal, oral and anal sex.

The reason that condoms do not provide 100% protection is because the genital herpes virus can literally 'shed' from other parts of your genital region (not covered by the condom) onto your partner. This is called viral shedding.

Viral shedding doesn't just occur when you have symptoms of an outbreak. It can happen at any time. This means there is a risk of passing

on the virus even when you don't have any symptoms.

It is recommended that you practise safe sex and use a condom during sexual activity.

It is important to remember that genital herpes doesn't have to spell the end of a healthy sex life. It just means that you need to take some extra precautions.

Speak to your doctor about the treatment of genital herpes and the most effective way to protect your partner.

■ How is genital herpes treated?

While there is no cure for genital herpes, it can be effectively treated and managed with antiviral therapy and by practising safe sex.

Antiviral therapy targets the virus which causes genital herpes by stopping it from multiplying. This can reduce the length and severity of an outbreak, and can even reduce the chances of another outbreak from occurring.

Speak to your doctor about how antiviral therapy can be tailored to suit your needs.

■ Where can I find more information?

You can find more information about genital herpes by visiting www.thefacts.com.au or by scanning the QR code below. You should also speak to your doctor or pharmacist if you have any further questions about genital herpes.



This factsheet has been produced by Aspen Australia and is of a general nature only. It is not intended to replace the need for a consultation with your doctor. If you have any further questions about genital herpes or its treatment, please speak to your healthcare professional.

References: 1. Aspen Pharmacare 2014, The Facts, viewed 24 Feb 2014, <www.thefacts.com.au>. 2. Better Health Channel 2013, Genital Herpes: fact sheet, State of Victoria, viewed 24 Feb 2014 <http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Genital_herpes>.

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