

## Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

# Genital herpes

**You may be upset to find out that you have genital herpes. But it isn't a serious illness. For many people, genital herpes is nothing more than a nuisance. If you're one of the few people who get severe symptoms, having treatment can help clear them and prevent further outbreaks.**

We've looked at the best and most up-to-date research to produce this information. You can use it to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are right for you.

### What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is a common infection caused by the herpes simplex virus.

There are two types of herpes simplex virus. Herpes simplex virus type 2 is the most common cause of genital herpes, but herpes simplex virus type 1 can cause it too. The type 1 virus also often causes cold sores (blisters on your lips and around your mouth).

Genital herpes spreads through sex. You can catch genital herpes from a sexual partner even when they have no symptoms, or before they know they have the virus. You can also get it by receiving oral sex from someone with a cold sore or from someone who has had a cold sore in the past.

You may not be able to tell you've got genital herpes because it doesn't always cause symptoms. But you can still pass it on to someone else through sex.

If you are in a long-term relationship, the appearance of genital herpes doesn't necessarily mean that you or your partner has been unfaithful. One of you could have been carrying a herpes virus for a long time without knowing it.

### What are the symptoms?

Many people with genital herpes have no symptoms. Others get outbreaks of painful spots, sores, or blisters in their genital area. Up to 8 in 10 people with genital herpes don't know they have it.

Symptoms are different for different people. You may get one or more of these symptoms:

- Itching, tingling, pain, or burning around your genitals
- Painful blisters or ulcers on or around your genitals
- Painful blisters or ulcers on your thighs or buttocks
- Itchy red patches or cracks in and around your genitals
- Enlarged lymph nodes in your groin.

You may have difficulty urinating if you're a woman.

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Some people also get a mild fever or headache the first time they have an outbreak of genital herpes.

Whatever symptoms you get, they will be worst the first time you get them. If you get another outbreak of symptoms, it will be milder than the first.

### What treatments work?

If your symptoms are mild, you could try simple treatments such as **salt water baths** and **painkillers**, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. This may be all the treatment you need.

**Antiviral drugs** are the main treatment when genital herpes causes severe symptoms. They can't get rid of the herpes virus from your body. But they can help keep the virus under control to help your symptoms clear up more quickly and reduce the number of outbreaks of symptoms you get. There are three antiviral drugs:

- Aciclovir (brand name Zovirax)
- Famciclovir (Famvir)
- Valaciclovir (Valtrex).

These medicines come as tablets, liquids, and injections. Injections are usually used for very bad first attacks of genital herpes. Injections may also be used in people whose immune system is not working so well (for example, because they have the HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) infection).

If you keep some antiviral drugs at home and take them as soon as you feel the symptoms coming on, they can help clear your symptoms more quickly. You will learn to recognise your early symptoms. The symptoms are different for different people.

If you have more than six outbreaks of genital herpes symptoms a year, your doctor might suggest that you take antiviral drugs every day. This can cut down the number of times you get symptoms and make you feel generally better. Drugs also work well for people who have HIV as well as the herpes virus.

Antiviral drugs cause few problems. You may get headaches or feel sick, but these side effects are usually mild and don't stop people taking their treatment.

**Psychotherapy** and other types of emotional support may help people cope better with genital herpes. It's possible that this kind of support could help reduce the number of outbreaks of symptoms you get. But there hasn't been enough good research to say for certain if it does.

### If you're pregnant

Women with genital herpes can pass on the infection to their babies during a vaginal delivery, whether or not they have genital symptoms at the time. The chance of this happening is very low, but herpes can make babies dangerously ill. For this reason, doctors recommend that if you have an outbreak of genital symptoms in late pregnancy,

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you have your baby by **caesarean section**. They think this reduces the chance of passing on the infection to your baby. But we don't know for certain if it's necessary.

Some doctors recommend taking **antiviral drugs** if you're pregnant, to reduce the chance of having symptoms at the time of delivery. But there hasn't been enough research to say whether this will reduce your chances of needing to have a caesarean section or protect your baby from getting infected.

Picking up the infection for the first time in late pregnancy can be dangerous for your baby. If your partner has genital herpes and you aren't infected, you should get advice from a specialist about how to protect yourself and your baby.

### What can I do to prevent passing on the infection?

- Most experts say you should avoid having sex with an uninfected partner when you have symptoms of genital herpes, or if you feel symptoms coming on. You are most likely to pass on the infection during these times.
- Men who use condoms are less likely to infect their sexual partners than men who don't. We don't know how well female condoms protect men or women from herpes.
- If you have genital herpes, taking an antiviral drug every day can reduce the chance of you passing it on to your uninfected partner.
- None of these precautions or treatments can protect your partner completely.

### What will happen to me?

Genital herpes is an infection that you can never get rid of. But most of the time the virus lives harmlessly inside your body.

Once you've had symptoms, you are likely to have them again. But the second outbreak of symptoms will be milder than the first, and you'll get better faster. You'll get fewer outbreaks over time, even without any treatment.

If you have genital herpes, you may feel shocked, depressed, or guilty. You may not feel like seeing friends or going out. Many people who have caught genital herpes feel angry. Talk to your doctor if you feel this way. They may be able to help. Bear in mind that genital herpes is very common and anyone who is sexually active can get it.

### Where to get more help

Finding out you have genital herpes can be a shock. Meeting people who have the condition and learning how they cope might help. The Herpes Virus Association (<http://www.herpes.org.uk>) can put you in touch with local groups. It also runs a helpline (0845 123 2305).

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