



# Genital Herpes

## What is Genital Herpes?

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that affects one in five adults.

Herpes is caused by a virus called herpes simplex virus (HSV). There are two types of herpes simplex viruses: Type 1 (HSV-1) and Type 2 (HSV-2). These viruses are very similar and either type can cause genital herpes or cold sores

Once you are infected with HSV, the virus remains in your body after symptoms are gone and can cause recurring outbreaks of the blisters and sore. Between outbreaks, the virus stays in your body. When the virus becomes active again, the symptoms return but blisters and sores are usually less painful and heal faster.

How often the virus becomes active again varies from person to person. Recognised triggers for an outbreak may include emotional or physical stress, exposure to sunlight, hormonal changes (e.g., menstruation), poor nutrition, sexual intercourse, lack of sleep or a low immune system (e.g., injury or other illnesses).

## Symptoms of Genital Herpes

Symptoms can vary from person to person and may include:

- fluid filled blisters which can be very painful in the genital area (vaginal lips, vagina, cervix, head/shaft/foreskin of penis, scrotum, in or at the urethra, buttocks, anus or thighs)
- flu-like symptoms (fever, joint pain, muscle aches)
- pain with urination
- enlarged, tender glands
- itching, tingling

Symptoms of herpes usually appear about two to 21 days after sexual contact with an infected person. Symptoms are usually the worst in the first outbreak. In following outbreaks, symptoms are usually milder. It may take two to three weeks for symptoms to go away. For some people the symptoms are so mild they may not be aware of them. Genital herpes tend to be less severe when caused by HSV-1 rather than by HSV-2.

## How Genital Herpes spreads

Herpes is spread by direct contact with the rashes, sores or blisters of an infected person. Contact (and trans-

For further information, please call:  
**York Region Health Connection 1-800-361-5653**  
**TTY 1-866-252-9933 or visit [www.york.ca](http://www.york.ca)**

fer of the virus) can occur from genitals to genitals, mouth to genitals or mouth to mouth. Herpes can also be passed to the anal area.

Herpes spreads most easily during sexual contact while symptoms are present, or just before an outbreak of symptoms (when the infected person may experience genital itching or tingling). However, an infected person may spread herpes even when he/she has no symptoms.

## Complications of Genital Herpes

- you can spread the herpes virus to other parts of your body after touching the sores. The fingers, eyes and other body areas can accidentally become infected in this way. To prevent spreading the virus to other parts of your body, wash your hands after touching the sores and blisters
- herpes sores can become infected with bacteria
- herpes of the eyes can cause blindness

## Herpes and pregnancy

Babies born to mothers with active herpes sores can become infected during birth. Although herpes infection in newborns is rare, it can cause serious consequences. A caesarean section may be needed if there are symptoms around the time of birth. The following precautions should be taken during pregnancy:

- if you are pregnant and have herpes, your health care provider may suggest or prescribe antiviral medication toward the end of your pregnancy
- if you are male and your partner is pregnant, abstain from sex when you have active outbreaks, use a condom between outbreaks and possibly abstain from intercourse during the last trimester
- if you have oral herpes, avoid oral sex during an outbreak. Twenty percent of neonatal herpes is caused by HSV-1

## Diagnosing Genital Herpes

Herpes is usually diagnosed by a physical examination and medical history. A sample of the fluid taken from the sores or blisters can be sent to a laboratory for testing. This test can only be done when sores are present, and should be done within 48 hours of the start of symptoms. If the sore is very small, or if it is healing, there may not be enough virus present for an accurate test.

## Treating Genital Herpes

There is no cure for herpes. Antiviral pills help to reduce symptoms and speed the healing of blisters or sores. These must be prescribed by a doctor. Medication for pain, bath salts, cold compresses and urinating in water may help to relieve discomfort. Keep the infected area clean and dry; wear cotton underwear and loose clothing to reduce discomfort.

## What about Sexual Partners?

All sexual partners within the past 60 days should be examined and treated. If you have not had sex in the past 60 days, your last sexual partner should be examined and treated. Tell your partner(s) that having no symptoms does not mean there is no infection. Your Public Health Nurse can help you to notify your partner(s). Your name will be kept confidential.

**For further information, please call:  
York Region Health Connection 1-800-361-5653  
TTY 1-866-252-9933 or visit [www.york.ca](http://www.york.ca)**



to make sure that you are cured. In some situations, such as if your symptoms continue after treatment, a health care professional