

What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is a chronic infection caused by two different but closely related viruses: herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) and herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2). HSV-2 is the most common cause of genital herpes, whereas HSV-1 typically causes oral herpes. Both types of HSV establish a lifelong latent infection in nerve cells, often with periodic recurrence of symptoms or with no symptoms at all.

How many people get genital herpes?

Epidemiological surveys estimate that 500,000 cases of new genital HSV infections occur each year in the United States, with at least 45 million individuals – or one in five Americans – are already infected. The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 21 million people worldwide are infected each year. Most people infected with HSV-2 are not aware of their infection.

How is genital herpes spread?

A person almost always gets HSV-2 infection during sexual contact with someone who has a genital HSV-2 infection. HSV-1 causes ‘fever blisters’ on the mouth and lips, and a person can contract HSV-1 by coming into contact with the saliva of an infected person. HSV-1 infection of the genitals is almost always caused by oral-genital sexual contact with a person who has the oral HSV-1 infection. Although HSV-1 and HSV-2 can be found and released from the sores caused by the viruses, they also are released between episodes from skin that does not have a sore or appear to be broken and infection can be spread even if the infected person appears asymptomatic.

How is genital herpes diagnosed?

The signs and symptoms associated with HSV-2 can vary greatly. If the outbreak is typical, health care providers can diagnose genital herpes by visual inspection and by taking a sample from the sore(s). However, HSV infections can be difficult to diagnose between outbreaks. Blood tests that detect HSV-1 or HSV-2 infection can be helpful, although often the results are not definitive.

Why is genital herpes serious?

Genital herpes infections usually do not cause major problems in healthy adults. However, similar to other genital diseases that produce sores, genital herpes increases a person’s risk of contracting HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Moreover, in immunocompromised individuals, outbreaks of genital herpes may be unusually severe and last for an extended period of time. Also, if a woman has her first episode of genital herpes while she is pregnant, the virus can be passed to her unborn child and she may deliver a premature baby. Approximately 50 percent of

babies infected with herpes either die or suffer from neurological damage. A child born with herpes may also develop serious problems affecting the brain, skin or eyes.

Can genital herpes be prevented?

Although the consistent and correct use of latex condoms can help protect against HSV-2 infection, condoms do not provide complete protection because the condom may not cover the entire affected area. Also, viral shedding may occur even when sores are not evident. To help prevent the spread of genital herpes, it is best to abstain from sex when symptoms or signs are present, and to use latex condoms between outbreaks.

How is genital herpes treated?

There is no cure for genital herpes, although there are treatments that disrupt the virus’ ability to reproduce, which can reduce symptoms and shorten duration of outbreaks. Because HSV is able to evade the body’s immune system and establish latency, it is difficult to effectively clear the infection. Current research includes exploring ways to activate the immune system to treat, control and/or prevent the disease.

DID YOU KNOW?

About one in five Americans age 12 and over is infected with the virus that causes genital herpes.

Most people infected with the genital herpes virus are unaware of the infection.

Genital herpes sores can facilitate the transmission of HIV.

The number of people with genital herpes infection has increased 30 percent since the late 1970s.

Current treatments can reduce the severity of outbreaks, but there is no cure for genital herpes.