

HERPES, GENITAL

BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

A virus infection of the genitals transmitted by sexual relations (intercourse or oral sex). It can affect sexually active males and females and may involve the vagina, cervix, thighs, but-tocks (sometimes) and penis. Genital herpes is often found in the presence of other sexually transmitted diseases.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- ˘ Painful blisters, preceded by itching, burning or irritation on the vaginal lips or penis. In women, the blisters may extend into the vagina to the cervix and urethra. After a few days, the blisters rupture and leave painful, shallow ulcers that last 1 to 3 weeks.
- ˘ Difficult, painful urination.
- ˘ Enlarged lymph glands.
- ˘ Fever and a general ill feeling.

CAUSES

- ˘ Herpes type 2 virus (HSV-2). Herpes type 1 virus (HSV-1) causes common cold sores, which appear around the mouth, but can sometimes cause genital herpes.
- ˘ Genital herpes is transmitted by a sexual partner who has active herpes lesions. Lesions may be on the genitals, hands, lips or mouth (including type 1 virus). Once transmitted, incubation period is 2 to 7 days. Sometimes, the infection can be acquired without any symptoms only to have a delayed out-break.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- ˘ Serious illness that has lowered resistance.
- ˘ Use of immunosuppressive or anticancer drugs.
- ˘ Stress (increases susceptibility to a primary infection or a recurrence). Stress may lead to diminished efficiency of the immune responses that usually suppress growth of the virus.
- ˘ Smoking.
- ˘ Other "triggers" that can cause a recurrence include genital trauma, menstruation, sunbathing, and existing infection of some other type.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- ˘ Avoid sexual intercourse if either partner has blisters or sores.
- ˘ Use a rubber condom during intercourse if either sex partner has inactive genital herpes (especially important if the infected partner has frequent recurrences).
- ˘ Avoid oral sex with a partner who has cold sores on the mouth.
- ˘ If you are pregnant, tell your doctor if you have had herpes or any genital lesions in the past. Precautions should be taken to prevent infection of the baby.
- ˘ Avoid stress where possible.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- ˘ Genital herpes is currently considered incurable, but symptoms and recurrence can be relieved with treatment.
- ˘ During symptom-free periods, the virus returns to its dormant state. Symptoms recur when the virus is reactivated. Recurrent symptoms are not new infections.
- ˘ The discomfort varies from person to person and from time to time in the same person. The first herpes infection is much more uncomfortable than following ones.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- ˘ Generalized disease and death in persons who must take anticancer drugs or immunosuppressive drugs.
- ˘ Transmittal of life-threatening systemic herpes to a newborn infant from an infected mother.
- ˘ Secondary bacterial infection.

TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- ˘ Diagnosis is usually determined by the appearance of the