

Herpes

Doctors refer to the infection commonly known as “herpes” as Herpes simplex. The herpes simplex virus can cause sores anywhere on a person’s skin. It usually occurs around the mouth and nose or the buttocks and genitals. Herpes simplex infection is painful, embarrassing and often will reappear again and again.

Say the word “Herpes” and most people think of the sexually transmitted disease genital Herpes. But Herpes is actually the name of a family of viruses, which includes the cold sore virus (HSV-1), Genital Herpes (HSV-2), infectious mononucleosis (Epstein-Barr Virus), chicken pox and shingles (varicella zoster virus).

The two Herpes Simplex viruses, HSV-1 and HSV-2, look identical under the microscope, and either type can infect the mouth or genitals. Most commonly, however, HSV-1 occurs above the waist, and HSV-2 below.

These viruses blend into the DNA of your genes after they infect you, especially in your nerves. They try to force your body to make copies of them so they can spread to other people. Your body’s immune system resists this. When your immune system is weakened, the virus finds a path to the skin and leaks out in tiny blisters. This is referred to as having a recurrence. Pain, burning or unusual tenderness of the skin may begin between one to several days before a recurrence.

Rarely, Herpes can be serious in those with weak immune systems, such as newborn babies. More often, herpes is a mild infection. Many people who are infected don’t even know that they are, and instead think they are having some chaffing or skin irritation. Years later, when there is a recurrence of HSV, it may be mistaken for an initial attack. This can lead to unfair accusations of infidelity.

Herpes simplex is very common. At least one in six adults in the United States has HSV-2. By the time you are a young adult, you are likely to have been exposed to HSV-1, as half and three quarter of all adults test positive to HSV 1, but only 10% of those exposed get visible sores.

Give yourself the best possible chance to limit recurrences by maintaining general good health and keeping stress to a minimum. Fortunately, recurrent infections tend to be milder than the initial attack. Also, HSV-1 infections tend to have fewer recurrences than HSV-2. Both may be set off by a variety of stress factors including fever, stress, and irritation at a site previously infected, sun exposure and menstruation. However, for many the recurrence is unpredictable and has no recognizable cause.

Take care of the affected skin area. Keep the area dry and clean during outbreaks to help healing. Avoid physical contact with the area from the time of the first symptoms (tingling, itching, burning) until all sores are completely healed, not just scabbed-over. Prevent self-infection to other areas of your body. Wash your hands with soap and water if you touch a sore. Better yet, don’t touch the sores as you can spread them. HSV may infect the eye and lead to a condition called herpes keratitis. It feels like there is something in the eye. There is also pain and sensitivity to light and a discharge. This can cause serious eye damage if not promptly treated.

There is a vaccine to prevent herpes being tested, but it has not been approved by the FDA for general use. Several oral anti-viral medications (Zovirax, Famvir and Valtrex) have been developed for severe or frequently returning infections. Low doses are sometimes helpful in reducing the number of herpes attacks in people with frequent outbreaks. There is some evidence that taking these will make HSV less contagious. People who have taken Famvir with the initial attack seem to have fewer recurrences.

Prevention of this disease, which is contagious before and during an outbreak, is important. If tingling, burning, itching or tenderness -- signs of a recurrence -- occurs in an area of the body where you had a herpes infection, then that area should be kept away from other people. With mouth lesions, one should avoid kissing and sharing cups or lip balms. For persons with genital herpes, this means avoiding sexual relations and oral and/or genital contact during the period of symptoms or active lesions. Towels should not be shared nor clothing exchanged.

In couples where one partner is infected, each year there is a ten percent chance the other partner will also become infected. A man with HSV is ten times more likely to infect his partner than a woman.

In our opinion, L-Lysine supplements, and both over the counter and prescription ointments for herpes are nearly useless.