

What is Herpes?

Herpes is a common viral infection that is spread through skin-to-skin contact. Herpes outbreaks usually show up as one or more little sores on the mouth, genitals or anus. A herpes infection is often so mild that there are no obvious symptoms.

There are two types of herpes: herpes simplex type 1 (HSV-1) and herpes simplex type 2 (HSV-2). We used to think of HSV-1 as the cold sore virus, and HSV-2 as the genital herpes virus, but we now know that this is not true. Either type can be on either location.

Most people get herpes on the mouth through non-sexual contact during childhood, such as a kiss from a relative. However, it is also possible to get herpes on the mouth through oral sex. Herpes on the genitals or anus is usually caused by sexual contact.

What are the symptoms?

Herpes symptoms are often called an “outbreak”. Symptoms can range from none, to mild, to severe. The symptoms that show up and how long they last are different for each person.

Many people have such mild outbreaks that they do not notice them. Other people may have uncomfortable or painful outbreaks. In people who do have repeat outbreaks, the first few outbreaks are usually worse than later outbreaks.

HOW OFTEN YOU HAVE AN OUTBREAK CAN DEPEND ON:

- The type of herpes you have (HSV-2 causes more outbreaks than HSV-1)
- How long you have had herpes for (new infections have more outbreaks)
- How strong your immune system is (weaker immune systems have more outbreaks)

GENERAL SYMPTOMS CAN INCLUDE:

- One or more sores that look like water blisters, cuts, or broken skin
- An itchy, tingling, burning, raw, or painful feeling on your skin
- Fever, headache, or muscle aches
- Feeling tired or unwell

SYMPTOMS OF GENITAL HERPES CAN INCLUDE:

- Pain in your legs or buttocks
- Swollen and tender lymph nodes in the groin area
- Painful urination (peeing)
- A change in vaginal discharge
- Swollen genitals

How is herpes passed?

Herpes is passed by direct skin-to-skin contact between a person who has the herpes virus and a person who does not have the virus. This usually happens with kissing or sexual activity.

Herpes is not passed by sharing toilet seats, furniture, sleeping in the same bed, or hugging. The virus does not live for more than a few minutes on most surfaces. It is easily killed with soap and water.

The herpes virus spreads most easily during an outbreak. If you have itching or tingling in the area where you usually get symptoms, or if you have visible sores, you should not have skin-to-skin contact with that area until the skin is completely healed and feels normal again.

Using barriers, like condoms, will reduce the chances of getting or passing herpes. **However, condoms do not fully protect against herpes because they do not cover the entire genital area.** For oral-genital contact (mouth on genitals or anus), barriers like dental dams can also lower the chances of getting or passing herpes.

Asymptomatic shedding

The herpes virus can sometimes be present on the skin even when there are no symptoms. This is called asymptomatic shedding. Asymptomatic shedding can happen at any time. How often it happens is different for each person, but it happens more with HSV-2 than with HSV-1. Shedding may also happen more often and for longer periods of time in the first year after infection.

Testing

If you see symptoms of herpes, or your health care provider has told you that you may have herpes, you can get a lab test. There are a few different tests used in British Columbia.

Swab test

This test can tell you if you have the herpes virus, what type you have, and where on your body you have it. A swab is taken from a sore or the surface of the skin to collect a sample of the virus. **For best results, it is important to have sores swabbed within 72 hours of seeing the symptoms.** Otherwise, the test may not pick up the virus if the sores have started to heal.

Non-type-specific blood test

This test can tell you if you have the herpes virus, but it will **not** tell you which type of herpes you have or where on your body you have it. Because herpes is very common, this test will be “positive” for many people.

Type-specific blood test

This test can tell you if you have the herpes virus and what type of herpes you have, but it will **not** tell you where on your body you have it. This test is not covered by the BC Medical Services Plan.

Treatment

Medication

There is no cure for herpes, but medications can help with symptoms. Prescription antiviral medication, such as acyclovir, valacyclovir, and famciclovir, work best if taken in the first 72 hours of an outbreak. These medications may shorten the length and severity of the outbreak, or stop it all together. You can get a prescription for these medications ahead of time, to have ready in case you get an outbreak.

The outbreak will go away even if you don't take antiviral medication.

If you get frequent outbreaks (6 or more a year), you may want to talk to your health care provider about daily suppressive antiviral therapy. This involves taking a dose of medication every day to lower the frequency of outbreaks and asymptomatic shedding.



MANAGING SYMPTOMS

- Eat well and get plenty of rest.
- Put ice packs (wrapped in a towel) on the sore skin for a short period of time.
- Take Acetaminophen (Tylenol) or Ibuprofen (Advil).
- Keep the skin area dry.
- Do not break open the blisters and do not put anything on your skin until you have seen a health care provider.
- Avoid sexual contact with the area. If you directly touch the area, wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water afterward.

FOR GENITAL HERPES

- Wear loose-fitting clothes and comfortable cotton underwear during an outbreak to reduce rubbing of the sore skin.
- Have warm baths or use a portable bath (like Sitz baths). Do not add bubble bath.
- If urination (peeing) hurts, pour warm water over your genitals when peeing or pee in a warm shower or bath. A Sitz bath may also help with this.
- Use a blow dryer on the cool setting to dry the area after bathing instead of using a towel.
- Try not to sit for long periods of time.



Living with herpes

There can be a lot of shame and stigma around herpes. For some people, finding out they have herpes can stir up intense feelings, such as anger, fear, hopelessness or depression. If you are feeling like this, remember that you are not alone and that your value as a person has not changed. It is okay to have these feelings, but if they are overwhelming, are going on for months, or are interfering with your everyday life, you may find counselling helpful.

It can take time to come to terms with finding out you have herpes. Be gentle with yourself and get plenty of sleep and rest. Take time for things that make you feel good, like walking, reading, journaling, exercising, building things, cooking, crafting or art. It may help to talk to a trusted person, such as a friend, relative, doctor, nurse or counsellor.

You may be wondering if you should tell your partner(s) and how you should do it. It is best to talk to your partners about your herpes status, but this is your decision to make. Telling partners helps them to make informed choices about their sexual health.

Visit SmartSexResource.com/herpes for more information and resources on herpes, including suggestions for how to talk to partners.