
▶ **What is herpes?**

Herpes is an infection caused by the Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV). There are two types of HSV (Type I & Type II. HSV can cause sores on the mouth (called cold sores) and the genitals (called genital herpes)

▶ **How is herpes spread?**

You can get herpes:

- by having skin to skin contact (including sexual), with someone who has herpes – with or without sores being present
- by kissing or having oral sex with someone who has a cold sore

If you are pregnant you may pass the virus to your baby during birth.

The first outbreak of HSV (called the primary outbreak) usually happens within the first three weeks after exposure but may take much longer.

▶ **How can I tell if I have herpes?**

You may have:

- tingling, burning or itching on your skin before a blister or sore appears
- painful blisters, open sore(s), irritation, small cracks or cuts on the skin in the genital area (your vagina, penis, anal or surrounding region). These usually heal within 2 weeks.
- feeling of burning when you pee
- flu-like symptoms—fever, headaches, body aches and pains

▶ **Is there a test for herpes?**

A health care provider can take a swab of any visible sores, blisters or cuts on the genitals.

▶ **How is herpes treated?**

There is no cure for herpes but there is medication that reduces the length and frequency of the outbreak.

There is ongoing research for a possible vaccine.

If you have an outbreak:

- abstain from sex
- keep the area clean and dry
- wear cotton underwear
- wear loose-fitting clothes
- put ice packs on the sores to reduce the pain

If it hurts when you pee, sit in a tub of warm water to pee or pour warm water over the area

▶ **Is follow-up necessary?**

If you have frequent outbreaks or you are feeling anxious or depressed, contact your health care provider.

▶ **Can herpes come back?**

Yes. Once you have herpes, it is in your system for life. Most people get more than one outbreak.

You can have an outbreak if you:

- are tired or under stress
- are ill
- are not eating well
- spent too much time in the sun
- have your period
- are pregnant
- have skin injury

▶ **How can I protect myself and others?**

- Tell your sex partner(s) that you have herpes, so they are aware of their risk of getting herpes.
- Always use condoms or a barrier for vaginal, anal and oral sex to reduce the chance of getting herpes. Remember condoms do not cover all the areas that can be infected by the herpes virus. Female condoms will cover more of the genital area.
- Do not give oral sex when you have a cold sore.
- Genital herpes increases your risk of getting and giving HIV
- Get an STI check- up to find out if you have any other STIs, especially if you've had a new sex partner, more than one sex partner, or suspect you have an infection. Ask your partner to get a check too.
- Not all STIs can be routinely tested.
- Consider getting immunized for STIs such as hepatitis B and Human Papillomavirus (HPV).
- Recognize that alcohol and drug use prior to sex can affect your decision to have safer sex.

▶ **Are there any special concerns about herpes?**

- Most often the virus can be given to another person when there are no symptoms, (called “asymptomatic shedding”)
- The majority of people with herpes have not been diagnosed.

- Outbreaks tend to decrease in severity and frequency over the years.
- Herpes can cause you to feel anxious and worried so it is important to get accurate information and emotional support once diagnosed.
- Herpes during pregnancy can lead to serious health problems for baby, especially if a pregnant woman gets a new herpes exposure late in the pregnancy.

▶ **Learning resources about herpes**

Check out these resources:

- [The Truth About Herpes – 4th Edition S.L. Sacks, '97](#)
- <http://www.herpeseonline.org/>

If you are pregnant, consult your health care provider about protecting your baby from the infection.

▶ **Who can I talk to if I have more questions?**

If you have concerns or questions, call and ask for Sexual Health, or visit the health unit website below.



**simcoe
muskoka**
DISTRICT HEALTH UNIT

Tel: 705-721-7520
Toll free: 1-877-721-7520
www.simcoemuskokahealth.org

▶ **Resources**

[Canadian Guidelines on Sexually Transmitted Infections \(2008\)](#)
[Public Health Agency Canada](#)

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