

# Genital Herpes - CDC Fact Sheet



You can get genital herpes even if your partner has no symptoms



## What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the herpes simplex viruses type 1 (HSV-1) or type 2 (HSV-2).

## How common is genital herpes?

Genital herpes infection is common in the United States. Nationwide, 16.2%, or about one out of six, people aged 14 to 49 years have genital HSV-2 infection. Over the past decade, the percentage of persons with genital herpes infection in the United States has remained stable.

Transmission from an infected male to his female partner is more likely than from an infected female to her male partner. Because of this, genital HSV-2 infection is more

common in women (approximately one out of five women aged 14 to 49 years) than in men (about one out of nine men aged 14 to 49 years).

## What are the symptoms of genital herpes?

Most individuals infected with HSV-1 or HSV-2 experience either no symptoms or have very mild symptoms that go unnoticed or are mistaken for another skin condition. Because of this, most people infected with HSV-2 are not aware of their infection. When symptoms do occur, they typically appear as one or more blisters on or around the genitals, rectum or mouth. The blisters break and leave painful sores that may take two to four weeks to heal. Experiencing these symptoms is sometimes referred to as having an “outbreak.” The first time someone has an outbreak they may also experience flu-like symptoms such as fever, body aches and swollen glands.

Repeat outbreaks of genital herpes are common, in particular during the first year of infection. Symptoms of repeat outbreaks are typically shorter in duration and less severe than the first outbreak of genital herpes. Although the infection can stay in the body indefinitely, the number of outbreaks tends to decrease over a period of years.

## How do people get genital herpes?

People get herpes by having sex with someone who has the disease. “Having sex” means anal, vaginal, or oral sex. HSV-1 and HSV-2 can be found in and released from the sores that the viruses cause. The viruses can also be released from skin that does not appear to have a sore. Generally, a person can only get HSV-2 infection during sexual contact with someone who has a genital HSV-2 infection. Transmission can occur from an infected partner who does not have a visible sore and may not know that he or she is infected.

HSV-1 can cause sores in the genital area and infections of the mouth and lips, so-called “fever blisters.” HSV-1 infection of the genitals is caused by mouth to genital or genital to genital contact with a person who has HSV-1 infection.

## What are the complications of genital herpes?

Genital herpes can cause painful genital sores in many adults and can be severe in people with suppressed immune systems. If a person with genital herpes touches their sores or the fluids from the sores, they may transfer herpes to another part of the body. This is particularly problematic if it is a sensitive location such as the eyes. This can be avoided by not touching the sores or fluids. If they are touched, immediate and thorough hand-washing make the transfer less likely.

Some people who contract genital herpes have concerns about how it will impact their overall health, sex life, and relationships. It is best to talk to a health care provider about those concerns, but it also is important to recognize that while herpes is not curable, it is a manageable condition. Since a genital herpes diagnosis may affect perceptions about existing or future sexual relationships, it is important to understand how to talk to sexual partners about STDs. One resource, GYT Campaign, can be found here: <http://www.cdcnpin.org/stdawareness/GYT.aspx>.

There are also potential complications for a pregnant woman and her unborn child. See “How does herpes infection affect a pregnant woman and her baby?” below for information about this.

