



**[The Lambda Clinic - Sexual Health Advice - Patient Information Leaflet](http://www.lambdaclinic.co.uk/genital-herpes.html)**  
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## **Genital Herpes**

### **What is genital herpes?**

Genital herpes is an infection of the genitals (penis in men and vulva / vagina in women) and surrounding area of skin. The buttocks and anus may also be affected. Genital herpes is caused by the herpes simplex virus. There are two types of herpes simplex virus:

*Type 1:* herpes simplex virus usually causes cold sores around the mouth. It is also a cause in up to 50% of all cases of genital herpes.

*Type 2:* herpes simplex virus usually only causing sores around the genital area. However, it can sometimes cause cold sores.

### **How do you get genital herpes?**

Genital herpes is passed on during vaginal, oral or anal sex with someone who has an outbreak of genital herpes or by skin-to-skin contact with a herpes simplex sore.

The first time you get infected with herpes is called the primary infection. You may, or may not, get any symptoms. Following a primary infection the virus remains in the body but lies inactive (dormant) in a nearby nerve. In some people the virus 'activates' from time to time, and travels down the nerve to the nearby skin. This causes recurrent symptoms of genital herpes if the primary infection was in the genitals, or recurrent cold sores if the primary infection was around the mouth.

### **What are the symptoms of genital herpes?**

Four in 5 people who are infected with the virus never have visible signs or symptoms at all, or not be aware of them. They, however, can still pass the infection on to others. In half of people who develop genital herpes the virus comes from a sexual partner who did not know they were infected with the virus.

In most people the first episode of symptoms/signs will appear 3 – 4 days after being first infected with the virus. It can however take months or years. This is why a first episode of symptoms can occur during a current faithful sexual relationship.

### **First episode of genital herpes**

Common symptoms include:

- Flu-like symptoms such as fever, headache, tiredness, aches and pains.
- Tingling, stinging, or itching in the genital / anal area
- Small painful blisters around the genitals / anus. These burst leaving small red sores which are painful and last for up to 10 – 14 days
- Pain on passing urine



- Swollen glands in groin which causes pain that can go down the legs

### **Recurrent genital herpes**

- Many people may never get another episode after the first primary infection. In those who do get a 'recurrence', symptoms are often less severe and clear up more quickly (in about a week compared to 2 – 3 weeks for the first episode)
- An early warning tingling or itch in the genital area often occurs 12 – 24 hours before infection occurs
- Time period between recurrences is variable

### **How is genital herpes diagnosed?**

- There is no obvious routine test for herpes if you do not have any signs or symptoms, such as blisters or sores
- If you do have symptoms, a doctor or nurse can tell if you have genital herpes simply by looking and examining you
- Confirmation of genital herpes can be done by using a swab to collect a sample of fluid from the blister / sore. This swab result usually takes approximately 6 days.

### **What is the treatment for genital herpes?**

General measures that may help to ease symptoms when they occur are:

- An ice pack (ice wrapped in a clean flannel) or using wet tea-bags placed over the sores for 5 – 10 minutes can be soothing. Ice should not be directly placed onto the skin as this may cause an 'ice burn'.
- Avoid using scented soaps or bubble bath may cause irritation. Salt water bathing is best.
- Gentle drying with a hair dryer may be more comfortable than with a towel.
- It is often less painful if you pass urine whilst sitting in a warm bath.
- Drinking extra fluids reduces the pain when passing urine.
- Wear loose clothing.
- Painkillers such as paracetamol can help to ease pain.
- As some people find the friction of having sex may trigger a recurrence using a lubricant can help.

### **Antiviral medication for genital herpes**

Antiviral medication does not eradicate the virus from the body. It works by stopping the virus from multiplying. Antiviral medication is useful for a first primary infection if it is started within five days of the symptoms by reducing the severity and duration of symptoms. Antiviral therapy may help to stop the recurrence of genital herpes. A five day course of treatment is usual, but may be extended until the blisters have started to crust.

Antiviral medication is not always needed to treat a recurrence. This is because symptoms are often much milder than the first episode, and usually last only a few days. However, some people get bad symptoms during recurrences and a five day course of medication can be useful. To reduce the duration and severity of a recurrence, medication should be started as soon as symptoms begin.



If you have frequent recurrences, an option is to take antiviral medication every day. This can reduce the frequency and severity or even stop recurrences completely.

### **How can I protect myself and my partner from genital herpes?**

Herpes simplex virus is very contagious when blisters and open sores are present. Genital herpes is usually passed on by vaginal or anal sex. However, if you have a cold sore you may also pass on the virus to cause genital herpes by having oral sex ('mouth to genital sex').

### **When you have symptoms (during a primary episode or recurrence) of genital herpes**

There is a high chance of passing on the virus if you have sex. It is best not to have sex from the time symptoms first start until they are fully over.

Using a condom may not fully protect you against passing on the virus as the condom only protects the area that is covered.

Simple steps that can help you protect yourself and your partner include:

- Avoiding kissing when there are cold sores around the mouth
- Avoiding oral sex the mouth or genital areas have open sores
- Avoiding any genital / anal contact there are genital sores
- Avoiding vaginal, oral or anal sex if you feel an episode starting

### **Does genital herpes affect fertility?**

Herpes simplex does not affect fertility in men or women.

### **How will I know how long I have had the genital herpes virus for?**

It is often impossible to know particularly if you do not get any symptoms or if they appear a long time after you have been exposed to genital herpes.

You or your partner may have been infected many years ago and not know about it.

You may never know whether you got genital herpes from your current partner or a previous one. These doubts can often be hard difficult to deal with.

Do not be afraid to talk to staff at the **Lambda Clinic** about any concerns.

### **Should I tell my partner about my genital herpes?**

If you have genital herpes:

- You may want to discuss it with your current sexual partner
- It is up to you whether to tell future partners. If you do not tell them, it is important to protect them from contact with the part of your body that is affected when you have symptoms.
- The staff at the **Lambda Clinic** can discuss with you how you might tell your partner(s).

[The Lambda Clinic](#)

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