

Herpes Simplex Virus- Factsheet

What is herpes simplex virus?

Herpes simplex viruses type 1 (HSV-1) and herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2) cause both asymptomatic and symptomatic infections that recur. Oral herpes (commonly called “cold sores” and “fever blisters”) is a common infection typically of the mouth area caused mostly by HSV-1 but HSV-2 can also rarely be passed from one person’s genitals to another person’s mouth and cause oral herpes. Genital herpes is a common sexually transmitted infection mostly caused by HSV-2 but also by HSV-1 through oral sex.

What are the symptoms of herpes simplex virus?

HSV can cause either primary (first time) or reactivation (recurrent) infections. The clinical course depends on your age and immune status, where it is on the body, whether it is a primary or recurrent infection, and whether it is HSV-1 or HSV-2. Primary infections last longer, involve illness signs in the body (like fever), and have higher rates of complications. Recurrent infections are typically milder and shorter. Herpes simplex viruses cause sores on the skin or mucous membranes such as around the mouth and lips and around the genitals or rectum but not limited to those areas. The sores typically appear as blisters that break and leave tender sores.

How is herpes simplex virus spread?

People contract herpes by touching infected saliva, mucous membranes, or skin. Herpes can also be transmitted when virus reactivates yet causes no symptoms (viral shedding).

How long are people contagious?

People are contagious while they have sores during a primary infection and during recurrent outbreaks. Even after an outbreak heals, it is still possible to spread herpes because there might be viral shedding. It’s even possible to have viral shedding without any symptoms and herpes can also be spread during those times.

Who gets herpes simplex virus?

People of any age can get herpes by direct skin-to-skin contact with someone who is infected. You can get herpes from someone who has sores on his or her lips, skin or genitals. Herpes is also spread when someone does not have any signs or symptoms of infection but are shedding the virus.

What treatment is available for people with herpes simplex virus?

Although there is no cure for herpes, treatments can relieve the symptoms. Medication can decrease the pain related to an outbreak and can shorten healing time. Overall, medical treatment of HSV infection is centered around specific antiviral treatment. While the same medications are active against HSV-1 and HSV-2, the location of the lesions and whether it is a primary outbreak or reactivation dictate the dosage and frequency of medication. Warm baths may relieve the pain associated with genital sores.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work or daycare?

Children usually can go to childcare or school with an active infection but may need to stay home if they drool a lot or are having their very first HSV outbreak. No one should participate in sports that involve skin-to-skin contact such as wrestling.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting herpes simplex virus?

Do not have skin-to-skin contact such as kissing or sex with someone with oral or genital herpes until after the sores dry up and the scabs fall off which generally takes about 10-14 days. Condoms may help reduce the risk of spreading herpes, but they are not completely safe, and herpes can still spread even with correct condom use. HSV is especially dangerous to babies under 6 months of age so anyone with cold sores should be careful not to kiss babies. The surest way to avoid transmission genital herpes is to abstain from sexual contact or be in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and is known to be uninfected. If you are pregnant or thinking about becoming pregnant, you should be careful about preventing genital HSV infection because it can be transmitted to your baby during vaginal delivery and potentially cause serious problems.