

Herpes



If you have herpes, you're not alone. Millions of Americans have it. Herpes has no cure. But you can control it. And you can learn how to protect yourself and others from outbreaks.

What is herpes?

Herpes is a long-term (chronic) viral infection caused by the herpes simplex virus. There are 2 types of herpes simplex virus, type 1 (HSV-1) and type 2 (HSV-2). Infection with either type can cause sores and mild pain. You get herpes from contact with someone who carries the virus.

If sores occur on the lips, you have oral herpes. These are most often caused by HSV-1. Sores that occur on the finger (herpetic whitlow) are also often caused by HSV-1. If sores occur on the penis or in or around the vagina or rectum, you have genital herpes. This is most often caused by HSV-2.

Herpes outbreaks

- The first outbreak of herpes sores is often the most severe. Then the white blood cells in the body's immune system respond to the infection. This response helps control the herpes virus. It also often helps make future attacks less severe.
- Some people have only 1 outbreak of sores. Some people have frequent outbreaks (every few weeks or months). Outbreaks of herpes sores often happen less often over time.
- Herpes sores may appear without a cause. Outbreaks are more likely when the immune system is weak. Other viral infections (such as a cold) can cause outbreaks. Stress from a poor diet, extreme tiredness (fatigue), or emotional upset can lead to outbreaks of sores. Exposure to strong sunlight often causes herpes sores to reappear.

To help prevent outbreaks

- To prevent oral herpes outbreaks, don't get overexposed to wind, sun, or extreme temperatures. Use sunscreen and lip balm on affected areas.
- If you are having outbreaks often, ask your healthcare provider about medicines that can help prevent outbreaks. Antiviral medicines taken daily are very effective at reducing outbreaks.

How herpes spreads to others

Herpes can be spread during an outbreak. But even if you don't have sores, you can still infect others. You can take steps to prevent this. Antiviral medicines are very effective at preventing herpes from spreading to others. Using condoms during sex can also help prevent the spread of the virus.

To protect yourself and others

- If you have an oral sore, don't kiss or have oral-genital contact.
- If you have a genital sore, don't have intercourse or oral-genital contact.
- Scrub your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and clean, running water after touching a sore.
- Use a condom each time you have sex. You can pass the virus even when you don't have sores. If you're not sure about the timing of certain kinds of physical contact, ask your healthcare provider.

- Tell any new partners that you have herpes.
- A woman can spread herpes to her newborn when giving birth, even without an active genital sore. If pregnant, tell your provider early in the pregnancy that you have herpes. Follow-up with advised treatment throughout your pregnancy. Contact your provider right away if you have any new symptoms.
- Daily antiviral medicine (acyclovir, famciclovir, or valacyclovir), along with consistent condom use, may reduce your chances of spreading herpes to an uninfected partner. Ask your healthcare provider if one of these medicines would be helpful for you.

Resources

[American Sexual Health Association, www.ashasexualhealth.org](http://www.ashasexualhealth.org) 919-361-8488

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov/std](http://www.cdc.gov/std) 800-232-4636

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