

The Herpes Virus



Herpes is a viral infection caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). There are two main types of the virus, HSV-1 and HSV-2. HSV-1 generally causes oral herpes presenting as fever blisters or cold sores on or around the mouth. It may also cause genital herpes, which may occur from oral-genital contact during an HSV infection. HSV-2 is the most common cause of genital herpes, but it can cause oral herpes, too. You can also get herpes anywhere on your skin. Depending on how you come in contact with the virus, either type can cause outbreaks near the mouth or on or near the sex organs.

Symptoms of the herpes virus

Many people who carry the herpes virus are unaware because they have no symptoms. Despite the absence of symptoms, however, the virus may spread from person to person (asymptomatic shedding). Most people transmit herpes when they don't have symptoms and aren't aware that they carry the infection. When present, the symptoms may come and go and may include:

- Genital burning, tingling, or sometimes itching
- Blisters or small fluid-filled bumps in the genital area, anus, or around the mouth
- Fevers
- Swollen lymph glands
- Pain during urination
- Blisters may rupture, revealing tiny ulcerations in your skin
- Painful ulcers that may heal to form scabs
- Discharge from the vagina or urethra (the tube from where urine passes out of the bladder)

Understanding the herpes virus

Herpes reproduces only when it is inside the body. It does so by tricking a healthy cell into making copies of the herpes virus. Each copy can infect nearby cells. But before too long, the body's defenses rally to stop the attack. The immune system forces the virus to retreat. Even then, the virus stays inside the body but does not cause disease. For some people, an outbreak never happens again. For others, outbreaks are more likely to occur due to:

- Menstruation
- Illness
- Poor diet
- Uncontrolled diabetes
- Extreme tiredness (fatigue)
- Being exposed to cold or strong sunlight
- Stress
- Poor immunity due to illness or medicines

How the herpes virus attacks

1. The herpes virus enters the body through a small break in the skin. The virus can also enter by direct contact with mucous membranes, such as those of the lips, vagina, or anus.
2. Inside the body, the herpes virus binds to a special site on a skin cell. Then part of the virus moves into the cell.
3. Inside the skin cell, the virus releases a set of instructions. These commands cause the cell to begin making copies of the herpes virus.
4. Herpes blisters appear on the skin. Herpes blisters may also appear on mucous membranes lining the mouth, vagina, or anus.

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