

# mxFlirt



One in eight  
Australians  
carries the  
genital herpes  
virus.

## PLAY IT SAFE

Breaking down myths about one of the most common STIs is the aim of today's National Herpes Day, as **MICHELLE READ** reports.

Millions of people have it, thousands of people show visible symptoms, but no one wants to talk about it.

It's herpes and it could be coming to a genital near you.

Australian Herpes Management Forum data shows that one in eight Australians has the virus and up to 80 per cent of those are unaware that they have it.

Whispers about the herpes virus have circulated for years – if you've got it you're promiscuous, you won't be able to have children, you won't be able to have sex and you can get it from a toilet seat.

Fortunately, none of the rumours are true, National Herpes Day spokeswoman Dr Catriona Ooi said.

"Herpes has a huge social stigma attached to it but it's manageable and it doesn't

need to have a huge impact on the person's life," she said.

Herpes is a common viral infection caused by one of two strains of the herpes simplex virus (HSV) – type one, which usually affects the face and lips and can show up as cold sores, or type two, which affects the genitals.

Type one can also infect the genitals, most commonly through oral sex.

Many people have the virus for years without showing any symptoms, while others who contract type two can initially suffer symptoms such as fever, aches and pains, swollen lymph nodes and sores on the genitals.

Once you've got the virus you're stuck with it – but don't panic, treatment is available.

"A lot of people who are first diagnosed think they're the only ones that have it and they assume they're a

social pariah," Ooi said.

"In the past, herpes has been associated with being unfaithful or being loose or sexually out there, which isn't the truth, because infection doesn't discriminate, people do."

Genital herpes is passed on through skin-to-skin contact, but sufferers don't have to kiss their sex lives goodbye.

Ooi said sexual contact should be avoided when symptoms are present, but the virus can still be active when symptoms are not visible, so sufferers should always use condoms.

Anti-viral medication can also help limit the likelihood of passing herpes on.

Ooi said people who showed symptoms of the virus should see their doctor and visit websites such as [www.thefacts.com.au](http://www.thefacts.com.au) to learn more about the condition.

"Accessing that information is incredibly important, and it's important for people to know that they're not alone," she said.

Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia senior medical officer Kathy McNamee said people feared telling their partners they had the virus more than the virus itself.

"It's really difficult, it's the thing that people with herpes worry about the most because there's such a social stigma attached to it," she said.

"We encourage people to tell their partners as soon as they can because often once the sexual relationship has started it becomes more and more difficult to let the partner know."

■ Visit [www.ahmf.com.au](http://www.ahmf.com.au) for more information.

often has no symptoms and, after being tested by a GP, is treated with antibiotics). Or I have genital warts. Or gonorrhea. Or syphilis."

Most of my friends that I went to school with in Canada would only have sex with a man after he had an STI check – including HIV/AIDS. And they'd insist on seeing the papers before giving him the green light.

But in Australia when it comes to sexual health it seems like people operate under the better-not-to-know principle. And this isn't just the case between lovers, it's playing out throughout the whole society.

In any given culture there are rules about sexual behaviour. And in any given culture these rules are consistently broken. Academics call this the gap between "ideology" and "praxis", between social beliefs versus what's actually going down. Which in Australia, is quite a bit.

Did you know that Australia has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancies among all developed countries? That we have increasingly high rates of STIs, of which, young people are the most at risk? Do you know the average age for Australian sexual "debut" is 16? And decreasing? It's better to know.

– DR BELLA

### HOW WAS IT FOR YOU?



**"Talking about sexual health is hard and telling someone you have an STI takes great courage."**

He is such a hottie. And you've liked him forever. And tonight he seems to be paying you extra attention. Giving you these little looks that scream significance. And after the party ends, he offers to walk you back to your place. And you're walking, and the night air is magnificent and you are dying to be kissed. You reach your house. Say fumbly things to each other. Agree to go inside. Pour a drink. Sit on the couch.

You know where this is heading. But, at what point to you tell him that you have genital herpes?

Genital herpes is the second most common STI (sexually transmitted infection) in Australia. It isn't curable.

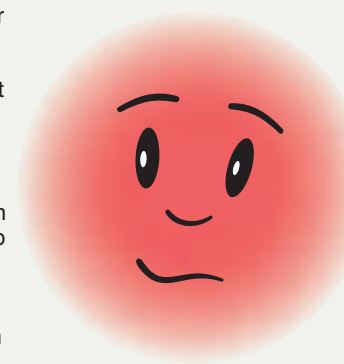
A recent study found that one in eight Australian adults and one in six women carry the virus.

The thing is, 80 per cent of people with herpes don't know they have it because they don't recognise or aren't experiencing symptoms. And even if they do know, how hard would it be to turn to the hottie who's finally paying you attention and tell him that before you get it on, you have to get something off your chest?

Talking about sexual health is hard and telling someone you have an STI takes great courage. Underestimated courage.

Sexual health practitioners tell young people to talk about their STI to their partner. This alone would be really daunting, but what about the pre-partner stage? Because there's still so much stigma associated with STIs, it's no easy task to turn to the person you want to make love to and say:

"You should know... I have chlamydia (the most common STI which can lead to infertility,



### HERPES MYTHS

● **You always know when you have genital herpes because you have lesions.**

**FACT** Genital herpes affects different people in different ways. Some people may have sores but others may show no symptoms at all.

● **I can never have children if I get genital herpes.**

**FACT** Genital herpes does not affect fertility. However, it is possible a newborn baby can be infected with the herpes virus

if your infection is active at the time of birth.

● **If you are in a long-term relationship and get genital herpes, your partner must be cheating on you.**

**FACT** Genital herpes outbreaks can occur with very mild symptoms that go unnoticed. You or your partner may have contracted the disease from a sexual partner a long time ago or your partner may have genital

herpes without knowing it.

● **Only promiscuous people get genital herpes.**

**FACT** Genital herpes is very common. You can get genital herpes even if you've had only one or two sexual partners.

● **Condoms protect against genital herpes.**

**FACT** Condoms reduce the risk of transmitting herpes, however, they do not entirely remove the risk. This is because the

condom may not cover all potential sites of viral shedding, may not remain in the same place during sex or may break.

● **If you get genital herpes you should never tell anyone or they will want nothing to do with you.**

**FACT** The fears that surround talking about this virus are greater than actually talking about it. Educating yourself about the virus and learning how to talk to others about it is vital.

**BTW**

Questions, thoughts, sexual tips? Email me at [dearbella@mxnet.com.au](mailto:dearbella@mxnet.com.au)