

**WHAT IS**

# **Genital Herpes?**

**Identifying, treating  
and preventing this  
sexually transmitted  
infection**

## What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is a common sexually transmitted infection (STI). It can cause blisters on an infected person's genital skin (the vagina, penis or testicles) or anus.

Genital herpes is caused by the Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV) (the same virus that causes cold sores on the mouth).

The symptoms are similar to cold sores on the mouth, except they appear on the genital skin.

Genital herpes doesn't cause cancer and doesn't affect a woman's chance of getting pregnant.

## How genital herpes is spread

You can get genital herpes by having sexual contact with someone who has HSV. This includes having skin contact with their genital or anal skin, or by having vaginal, anal or oral sex.

The virus can be passed on even if the other person has no symptoms, or doesn't think there is anything wrong.

**To prevent spreading the virus to your partner(s), wait until the blisters and sores have healed before having sex.** Although using a condom will give some protection, the virus can be passed on to any area not covered by a condom.

In rare cases, a mother may pass the virus to her baby during childbirth. If you are pregnant, talk to your midwife or doctor.

## Signs and symptoms

Genital herpes can affect people in different ways. Most people don't get any symptoms, so they don't know they have the virus.

If symptoms are present, they may include:

- painful blisters and sores on the genital skin
- tingling or pain in the genital area before the blisters appear.

Symptoms normally appear anytime from a few days to a few weeks after contact with HSV. Sometimes they can appear months or years later.

The first time you get genital herpes symptoms, you may feel like you're getting the flu (fever, headache, sore muscles). You could have pain in your buttocks or legs. Without treatment, these symptoms can last a few weeks. The sores may make peeing (urinating) painful.

If you get genital herpes symptoms once, you will probably get them again (called outbreaks). Outbreaks are often mild, with a few blisters or sores, and they usually heal within a week.

**You may have HSV with no symptoms. This means that you could pass the virus to your partner(s) without knowing it.**

## What if I have symptoms?

If you have symptoms, visit your doctor, your student health or youth clinic or a Sexual Health Services or Family Planning clinic. They will look at the affected area, talk to you about treatment and take a swab from one of the blisters or sores. The swab is sent to a laboratory to test for HSV.



## Treating genital herpes

### **Treatment needs to start as soon as possible.**

You'll be given medicine to treat your symptoms. Some people may also need to take medicine to stop more outbreaks.

### **Taking the medicine may make you feel slightly sick or give you a headache.**

The medicine will only treat the symptoms; it can't cure the infection.

You can help the blisters and sores to heal by keeping the affected area:

- clean – bathe once a day in salty water. Don't use soap or rub the blisters or sores.
- dry – after bathing, dry the affected area carefully and thoroughly.

To help with the pain, you could take aspirin or paracetamol, or use a pain-relieving gel on the area.



## Can I prevent an outbreak?

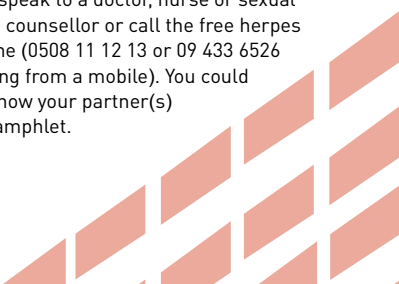
Being tired, stressed or premenstrual, drinking too much alcohol or taking drugs can cause an outbreak. Talk to your doctor or nurse about:

- medicine to stop outbreaks from happening
- reducing stress
- eating well and staying active
- getting more sleep
- controlling your use of alcohol, cigarettes and other drugs.

## Should I tell my partner(s)?

Yes. Even if you have no symptoms, you can still pass on the virus. You may have infected your partner(s), or they may have infected you without knowing it. They may have developed genital herpes symptoms and need treatment.

If you need help to tell your partner(s), you could speak to a doctor, nurse or sexual health counsellor or call the free herpes helpline (0508 11 12 13 or 09 433 6526 if calling from a mobile). You could also show your partner(s) this pamphlet.



## Protecting yourself and others

**To prevent spreading the virus to your partner(s), wait until the blisters and sores have healed before having sex.**

**Use a condom.** Using a condom every time you have sex reduces your risk of getting genital herpes and other STIs. Although using a condom will give some protection, the virus can be passed on to any area not covered by a condom. (See the next section for how to use a condom.)

You can get condoms on prescription from your doctor, or you can get them free from Sexual Health Services and Family Planning clinics. You can also buy condoms from pharmacies, supermarkets, pubs, clubs and some dairies.

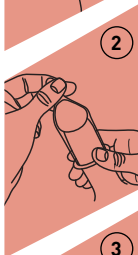
**Have a sexual health check,** especially if you think you have genital herpes or another STI. You can get checked at your doctor's, at some student health and youth clinics, at Sexual Health Services and Family Planning clinics.



## How to use a condom

To help protect against genital herpes and other STIs, cover the penis with the condom **before** it touches the partner's vagina, mouth or anus. **Use a new and lubricated condom each time you have sex.**

- Check the expiry date on the condom packet. If this date has passed, throw the condom away and use one that hasn't expired.
- Open the packet carefully. Fingernails, rings and teeth can tear the condom.
- Before the condom comes into contact with the penis, check that the condom is the right way up (figure 1). Do this by pinching the top of the condom and rolling it down a little. It's the right way up if it rolls down easily (figure 2).
- Continue pinching the top of the condom and roll it onto the hard penis, all the way down to the base (figure 3).
- Apply a water-based lubricant (eg, KY Jelly, Wet Stuff, Sylk or Top Gel) to the condom (figure 4). Oil-based lubricants such as Vaseline can damage condoms.
- After ejaculating (cumming) and when withdrawing, prevent semen from being spilt by holding the condom onto the base of the penis. Remove the used condom from the penis and wrap it in tissue or toilet paper. Put it in the rubbish.





## More information

You can get more information about genital herpes and other STIs from:

- your doctor or nurse
- the public health nurse at your school
- Student Health Services at your university, polytechnic or school
- youth health clinics in your area
- Sexual Health Services – for clinics in your area, visit [www.nzshs.org/clinics](http://www.nzshs.org/clinics)
- Family Planning - for clinics in your area, call (free) 0800 INFOLINE (0800 4636 5463) or visit [www.familyplanning.org.nz](http://www.familyplanning.org.nz)
- the Herpes Helpline (free) on 0508 111 213 from a landline, 09 433 6526 from a mobile, or [www.herpes.org.nz](http://www.herpes.org.nz)
- the Just the Facts website at [www.justthefacts.co.nz](http://www.justthefacts.co.nz)

Read the following leaflets (available from your health provider and the HealthEd website [www.healthed.govt.nz](http://www.healthed.govt.nz)):

- *Chlamydia: Information Guide*. Code HP4609
- *What is Gonorrhoea?* Code HE1442
- *What are Genital Warts?* Code HE1444
- *Should I Have a Sexual Health Check?* Code HE1445
- *What is Syphilis?* Code HE2576
- *Being Safer Sexually*. Code HE7002
- *A Compact Guide to Sexual Health*. Code HE1438.

## Remember

Genital herpes is a common sexually transmitted infection.

Genital herpes can cause blisters and sores on the genital skin.

Genital herpes symptoms can be treated, but the infection can't be cured.

Most people with genital herpes don't have symptoms. People with no symptoms can pass the virus on to their partner(s).

If you have symptoms, visit your doctor, your student health or youth clinic or a Sexual Health Services or Family Planning clinic. Treatment needs to start as soon as possible.

Wait until the symptoms have cleared before having sex.

To help protect against genital herpes, always use a condom when having sex.

This resource is based on information from the New Zealand Sexual Health Society's *Genital Herpes Patient Information Leaflet*, September 2017, available at [www.nzshs.org](http://www.nzshs.org)



New Zealand Government



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This resource is available from [www.health.govt.nz](http://www.health.govt.nz) or the authorised provider at your local DHB.

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