

Living with genital herpes

Herpes is not the end. Here's how to live with HSV.

Genital herpes is a common sexually transmitted disease (STD) that affects around 776,000 people in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It is caused by two types of the herpes simplex virus - type 1 (HSV-1) and type 2 (HSV-2). HSV-2 is more common in women than in men.

People become infected when they're in contact with HSV through genital or oral touching. HSV-2 is predominantly transmitted through genital contact, but a person can get infected with HSV-1 through oral sex.

There is no cure for herpes and once contracted, a person will carry the virus for life. However, symptoms of the condition are perfectly manageable and people continue to live fulfilling lives despite carrying HSV.

How to live with genital herpes

When you find out that you have herpes, it can be a shock at first. But having an STD is fairly common, so you don't have to feel ashamed about getting medical help. It may not be much consolation, but herpes really could happen to anyone. Luckily, there's a lot of support and advice available online and through healthcare providers to help you deal with a genital diagnosis and manage symptoms long-term. But what are the symptoms?

Symptoms of genital herpes

Most people won't even notice that they've been infected with HSV; that is their symptoms are mild or do not show up at all. Occasionally, they may have a skin breakout. Common symptoms of genital herpes are:

- Herpes lesions (small blisters surrounding the genitals, mouth or rectum)
- Ulcers
- Fever
- Body aches and headaches
- Swollen lymph nodes

It can take around 4 days for symptoms to show up after you've contracted HSV.

How bad is herpes?

Here's the good news: herpes is not deadly. Outbreaks may be unpleasant and annoying at times. Patients can also feel embarrassed about their symptoms, especially if they're dating.

The first time you experience a herpes breakout, your symptoms could be worse and last longer to heal. Subsequent breakouts have been shown to be less severe.

There are no other medical conditions or side effects associated with herpes other than discomfort.

Managing herpes: how to control genital herpes?

If you've been diagnosed with herpes, your doctor will usually discuss a treatment plan with you. Genital herpes outbreaks can usually be controlled by taking **antiviral medication** such as acyclovir. These drugs can help reduce the pain and discomfort of an outbreak.

Most patients will take antiviral medication for a duration of 7 to 10 days only after an outbreak has occurred. If you experience frequent outbreaks, you can take antivirals daily to prevent flare-ups.

Genital herpes usually lasts between 2 to 3 weeks to heal completely.

There are several **self-care strategies** to minimize discomfort from genital herpes. These include:

- Take a painkiller to ease pain
- Use cold compresses to reduce itching or discomfort
- Air can speed up healing, so wear breathable underwear and do not apply bandages
- Do not pick sores or apply creams unless prescribed by a doctor

Prevention of outbreaks is another useful approach to living with genital herpes. Make sure you eat nutritious foods and get enough sleep to strengthen your immune system. Keep stress to a minimum. If you have herpes around your lips, avoid extreme weather (hot, cold, windy).

Dating with herpes

Life doesn't stop just because you carry HSV. Many people in relationships will be carriers of the virus. But it's important to minimize the spreading of the disease.

- Wear a condom during sex (including oral sex).
- Be open and upfront about the fact that you have herpes with a partner before having sex. They deserve to know and be part of the decision-making process.
- Avoid sex during breakouts.
- If you notice any sores on your mouth, genitals or anus, do not have sex.
- Do not kiss if you have mouth sores.
- Avoid sharing a toothbrush, towels, dishes, utensils or lipstick.
- Always wash your hands after touching a sore.
- If you have frequent breakouts, consider taking antiviral medication daily.

If you are dating someone with herpes, make sure you take similar precautions. You could also consider asking a partner to be tested for herpes before engaging in sexual activity.

How to tell your partner you have genital herpes?

It's important to be open with a sexual partner about your genital herpes. There is now less of a stigma attached to the condition so don't freak out. Pick a good time and a relaxing setting to tell a prospective partner.

Genital herpes is completely manageable, so keep that in mind when disclosing your condition. If you don't turn it into a huge issue, your partner will likely not perceive it as such. Let them know about the solutions and how you can have sex together without spreading HSV.

It's advisable to learn as much as you can about HSV so that you are able to answer any of your partner's questions.

What are the chances of getting genital herpes from an infected partner?

For women, the risk of getting HSV-2 via sexual interaction is 10% per annum and for men it is 4%.

Condoms have been shown to reduce the risk of HSV-2 transmission "by 65% from women to men and 96% from men to women".

Although antiviral medications can reduce the risk of spreading HSV, there are no clinical studies to confirm that drugs are effective in managing the risk of spreading the virus. So always wear condoms.

Genital herpes and pregnancy

If you become pregnant after you've had herpes for a while, the risk of your baby getting herpes is low. It's best to speak to a doctor and let them know that you have HSV.

If you get herpes after you've conceived, there could be serious complications and you must let your health provider know immediately. The risk of neonatal infection is as high as 50% during late pregnancy compared to 1% during early pregnancy. Herpes can be passed on from mother to child during birth resulting in miscarriage or premature birth. If herpes is given to a child during birth, there's also an increased risk of brain and eye damage.

Women who suffer an outbreak before childbirth are usually recommended to undergo a C-section to avoid their infant from contacting herpes sores. Mouth sores are usually not a problem, but you should wait to kiss your baby until they have fully healed.

Pregnant women with herpes are often prescribed a course of antiviral medications. It's advised that women abstain from unprotected sex with a partner or a partner known to carry HSV.

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Genital herpes is a condition many people live with and it usually does not greatly affect their daily lives. If you've recently been diagnosed with herpes and would like to speak to someone, there are various online support groups.

Treatment and self-care options exist to ease symptoms with antiviral medications being the most common option.

Living with genital herpes means you need to take extra precautions when having sex with other people.

If you have HSV and are looking to become pregnant, let your doctor know.

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