

*Herpes is easily spread through kissing and sex. It can cause painful ulcers on the genitals, mouth and anus. There is no cure, but medications can help. Condoms and medication can help to prevent transmission.*

## Herpes

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### What is herpes?

Herpes is a sexually transmissible infection caused by the *herpes simplex virus* (HSV). There are two types of HSV: HSV1 and HSV2. Both types of herpes can occur on the lips, mouth, genital or anal areas, and one person can be infected by both HSV1 and HSV2. HSV on the lips and mouth is known as *cold sores* and HSV on the genital and anal areas is known as *genital and anal herpes*.

Around 75 in every 100 Australian adults are infected with HSV1, and around 12 in 100 have HSV2. Women are twice as likely as men to have HSV2.

Herpes enters the body through the skin of the mouth, genitals and anus, or through tiny cuts or scrapes in the skin. It lives in the nerves beneath the skin and can remain there, inactive and unnoticed, for many years.

### What are the symptoms?

Symptoms can appear days, weeks or months after infection. They can begin with subtle early warning signs like tingling, itching or pain in the infected area. This may be followed by blisters that break and become painful ulcers. The ulcers heal by themselves but may cause itching. The outbreak lasts for about one week from the first symptoms to the time the ulcers heal.

The first episode of symptoms is usually the longest and the most painful. Some people only have symptoms once, and others have symptoms occasionally. A few people have more problems with symptoms, but this usually improves over time. Medication helps with symptoms.

Many people with herpes have no symptoms and do not know that they have it.

### How is it transmitted?

Herpes is transmitted through skin-to-skin contact during vaginal, anal or oral sex; during foreplay or non-penetrative sex or by kissing. Herpes can be transmitted even when no signs or symptoms are present.

If a pregnant woman has a genital herpes outbreak when she gives birth she may pass the virus to her baby when the baby passes through the birth canal. Herpes transmission during birth can cause severe complications for babies, so pregnant women should tell their obstetrician or midwife if they have ever had a herpes diagnosis.

If the first episode of herpes happens during pregnancy it can also cause complications, so pregnant women who suspect they have caught herpes during their pregnancy, should seek immediate medical advice.

Pregnant women without symptoms whose partners have a diagnosis of herpes should also consult their doctor or obstetrician.

### How is it prevented?

Using condoms and water based lubricant can significantly reduce the risk of transmission of

herpes and other sexually transmissible infections. Taking antiviral medication also reduces the risk of herpes transmission.

Go for a regular sexually transmissible infection (STI) check-up to find infections before complications develop and to prevent transmission to others. Always use condoms.

Avoiding skin contact if symptoms appear on the mouth, genitals or anus provides additional protection.

### How is it diagnosed?

If there are symptoms, a doctor can test for herpes by taking a swab (using a long cotton bud) from the ulcer or blister. The doctor may also be able to diagnose herpes by a physical examination. It is important to see the doctor as soon as possible while the symptoms are there.

If there are no symptoms, a blood sample may be taken to test for herpes antibodies. This test cannot tell where the infection is (on the mouth, genitals or anal area), and it may not show an infection right away because herpes antibodies can take between 3 to 6 months to develop.

Herpes tests cannot tell when the infection first happened, because herpes can lie unnoticed for months or years before any symptoms appear.

### How is it treated?

Antiviral medications help to reduce symptoms and transmission, but there is no cure for herpes. The medications can be started as early as possible before or after the blisters emerge. This makes them more effective in controlling the duration and severity of symptoms. People who have frequent recurrences of herpes can take antiviral medications every day to reduce recurrences.

Managing herpes symptoms is important. Keeping the area dry, wearing loose clothing and resting is helpful. Salt water baths and paracetamol can help the pain. Your doctor can provide support in managing the psychological and emotional impact of herpes or can refer you for counselling.

### Telling partners

If you have herpes it is important to tell your sexual partners so they know about the transmission risks and can think about being tested. Your doctor can help you to decide who may be at risk and help you to contact them. If you wish, your doctor can make the contact or contacts.

The information in this fact sheet is general and you should see a doctor if you are worried about your health.

### Contact

NSW Sexual Health Infoline freecall **1800 451 624**.

Ask at your local sexual health clinic or the NSW Sexual Health Infoline about **herpes support groups**.