

## **SOME FACTS ABOUT GENITAL HERPES**

### **What is genital herpes?**

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2). Herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) commonly causes fever blisters on the mouth or face (oral herpes), while HSV-2 typically affects the genital area (genital herpes). However, both viral types can cause either genital or oral infections. Most of the time, HSV-1 and HSV-2 are inactive, or "silent," and cause no symptoms, but some infected people have "outbreaks" of blisters and ulcers. Once infected with HSV, people remain infected for life.

### **How is genital herpes spread?**

HSV-1 and HSV-2 are transmitted through direct contact, including kissing, sexual contact (vaginal, oral, or anal sex), or skin-to-skin contact.

Genital herpes can be transmitted with or without the presence of sores or other symptoms. It often is transmitted by people who are unaware that they are infected, or by people who do not recognize that their infection can be transmitted even when they have no symptoms.

### **How common is genital herpes?**

Results of a recent, nationally representative study show that genital herpes infection is common in the United States. HSV-2 infection is more common in women (approximately one out of four women) than in men (almost one out of five). This may be because male to female transmission is more efficient than female to male transmission. Since the late 1970s, the number of Americans with genital herpes infection (i.e., prevalence) has increased 30%.

### **Is genital herpes serious?**

HSV-2 usually produces mild symptoms, and most people with HSV-2 infection have no recognized symptoms. However, HSV-2 can cause recurrent painful genital ulcers in many adults, and HSV-2 infection can be severe in people with suppressed immune systems. Regardless of severity of symptoms, genital herpes frequently causes psychological distress among people who know they are infected.

In addition, HSV-2 can cause potentially fatal infections in infants if the mother is shedding virus at the time of delivery. It is important that women avoid contracting herpes during pregnancy, because a first episode during pregnancy creates a greater risk of transmission to the newborn. If a woman has active genital herpes at delivery, a cesarean-section delivery is usually performed. Fortunately, infection of an infant is rare among women with HSV-2 infection.

In the United States, HSV-2 may play a major role in the heterosexual spread of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Herpes can make people more susceptible to HIV infection, and can make HIV-infected individuals more infectious.

### **What happens when someone is infected with genital herpes?**

Most people infected with HSV-2 are not aware of their infection. However, if symptoms occur during the primary episode, they can be quite pronounced. The primary episode usually occurs within two weeks after the virus is transmitted, and lesions typically heal within two to four weeks. Other symptoms during the primary episode may include a second crop of lesions, or flu-like symptoms, including fever and swollen glands. However, some individuals with HSV-2 infection may never have lesions, or may have very mild symptoms that they don't even notice or that they mistake for insect bites or a rash.

Most people diagnosed with a primary episode of genital herpes can expect to have several symptomatic recurrences a year (average four or five); these recurrences usually are most noticeable within the first year following the first episode.

### **How is genital herpes diagnosed?**

The signs and symptoms associated with HSV-2 can vary greatly among individuals. Health care providers can diagnose genital herpes by visual inspection, by taking a sample from the sore(s) and by testing it to see if the herpes virus is present.

### **Is there a cure for herpes?**

There is no treatment that can cure herpes, but antiviral medications can shorten and prevent outbreaks for whatever period of time the person takes the medication.

### **How can people protect themselves against infection?**

The consistent and correct use of latex condoms is the best protection. However, condoms do not provide complete protection, because a herpes lesion may not be covered by the condom and viral shedding may occur. If you or your partner has genital herpes, it is best to abstain from sex when symptoms are present, and to use latex condoms between outbreaks.