

sextalk.

answers to your questions about sex and relationships

factoid About one in five adults in the United States has genital herpes, however as many as 90 percent are unaware that they have the virus.

Q. I've had canker sore outbreaks for as long as I can remember. The sores are shallow, with a white film and always appear inside my mouth. At one point, I saw a doctor about them. She said that almost everyone has them and they do not overlap with genital herpes. I accepted this as fact until I recently learned that my girlfriend has oral herpes (HSV-1). I found out that HSV-1 and HSV-2 (genital herpes) are capable of infecting both the mouth and the genitals through sexual contact. So, should I be worried about spreading herpes?

A. First, let's clear up some confusion. Cold sores – a.k.a., oral herpes, herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) – are painful, red blister-like sores that are highly contagious and generally appear on the lips and outer edge of the mouth. Canker sores, on the other hand, are painful open sores that appear on the inner mouth and cheek, or as pimples on the tongue. Thought to be triggered by stress, canker sores are neither contagious nor related to herpes. Your description of shallow sores with a white film residing inside the mouth sounds highly characteristic of canker sores – not oral herpes (HSV-1).

Since your girlfriend has HSV-1, it's possible that you could become infected too. HSV-1 is very common. Approximately 50% of teenagers and young adults in the U.S. have HSV-1, and by age 50 that number rises to 80-90%.

Although labeled differently, oral herpes (HSV-1) and genital herpes (HSV-2) can overlap and infect either the oral and/or genital areas. This means that HSV-1 *can* be spread to the genitals through oral sex, just as HSV-2 can be spread to the mouth through oral sex. Canker sores, as mentioned earlier, are not contagious and will not affect your partner's mouth nor her genitals.

Since you know your partner's HSV status, it's important that you communicate with her, practice safer sex, and determine an acceptable amount of risk given your relationship. For more information about herpes simplex virus, visit the ASHA National Herpes Resource Center at <http://www.ashastd.org/hrc/educate.html>.

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