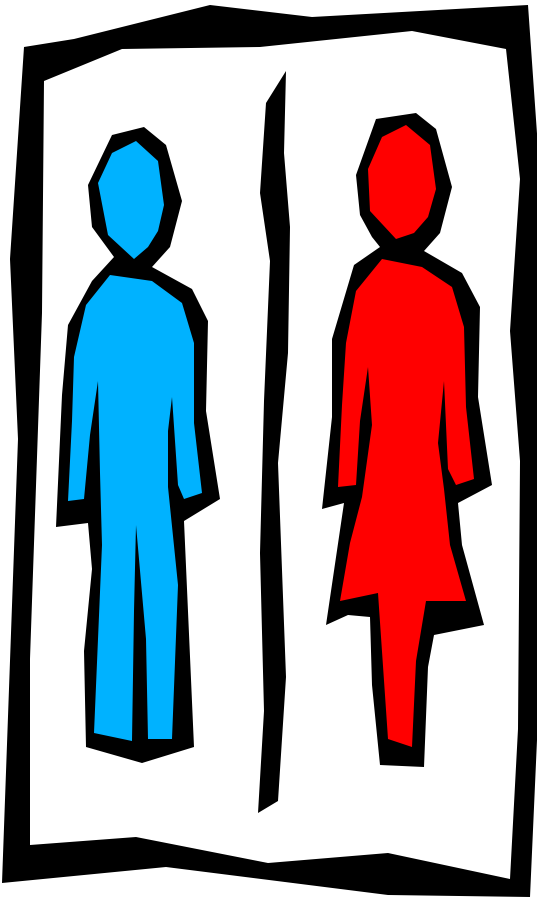


Facts about Herpes Simplex



The herpes simplex virus (HSV) can cause blister-like sores almost anywhere on a person's skin, though it usually occurs around the mouth and nose or the buttocks and genitals.

HSV infections can become a real nuisance because they tend to reappear. The sores may be painful and embarrassing, often interfering with work and personal lives. For some chronically ill people and newborn babies, the viral infections can be serious and occasionally fatal.

There are two types of HSV – Type 1 and Type 2. Studies show that most people contract Type 1 – which usually affects the lips, mouth, nose, chin or cheeks during infancy or childhood. They usually acquire it from close contact with family members or friends who carry the virus and transmit it to them by touching, kissing, and by the use of common eating utensils and towels. A rash or cold sores involving the mouth and gums appear shortly after exposure. Symptoms may be barely noticeable or may necessitate medical attention for pain relief.

What is Herpes?

Herpes is a family name for some 50 related viruses. In addition to herpes simplex, the family also contains the viruses responsible for infectious mononucleosis (Epstein-Barr Virus), chicken pox (varicella), and shingles (herpes zoster).

Patients sometimes confuse herpes simplex and herpes zoster because of the similarity in names. Herpes zoster (shingles) is caused by the same virus that produces chicken pox. It may occur in childhood, but it is seen most frequently in adults. It is extremely rare to have recurrent infections with this virus. Clinically, the infection is manifested by burning, itching and pain, accompanied by grouped blisters, which proceed to crust and are distributed over one side of the body. The most frequent sites of involvement are the trunk and head.

What is Herpes Simplex Type 1?

Called fever blisters or cold sores, HSV Type 1 infections typically take the form of tiny, clear, fluid-filled blisters on the face. Type 1 infections may also occur in the genital area after oral sexual exposure with an individual who has a herpes infection on the face.

Type 1 occurs on mucous membranes and may also develop in wounds on the skin. Nurses, physicians, dentists, and other health care workers sometimes contract a herpetic sore after HSV enters a break in the skin of their fingers.

There are two kinds of infections – primary and recurrent. Though most individuals contract the virus, only 10% or so will actually develop symptoms indicative of a primary, or first, infection. The primary infection lasts from seven to ten days and appears two to twenty days after direct exposure to an infected person.

The number of blisters varies, from one to a whole cluster. Before the blisters erupt, the soon-to-be-infected skin may itch or become very sensitive. The natural course of the blisters is to break spontaneously or as a result of minor trauma, allowing the fluid contents to ooze.

Eventually, scabs form and slough, leaving slightly red skin.

Though the primary infection heals completely, rarely causing a scar, the virus that caused it remains in the body, migrating to nerve cells where it remains in a dormant phase.

Many people will not experience another infection or recurrence. Others will be plagued with recurrences, either in the same location as the first infection or in a nearby location. The infections may recur every few weeks or infrequently.

Recurrent infections, which tend to be milder than primary infections, may be triggered by a variety of stresses, including fever, exposure to the sun, and menstruation. However, for many individuals, the recurrences are unpredictable and have no recognizable precipitating cause.

What is Herpes Simplex Virus Type 2?

Infection with herpes simplex virus Type 2 usually occurs below the waist, on the buttocks, penis, vagina or cervix, two to twenty days after contact with an infected person. While sexual intercourse is a frequent means of transmission, infection may occur in spite of complete abstinence. Symptoms of both primary and repeat attacks can include a minor rash or itching, painful sores, fever, achy muscles, and a burning sensation during urination. Researchers have confirmed that HSV Type 1

infections can occur in the genital area. Likewise, HSV Type 2 can occur in locations other than the genital area. Symptoms and consequences are the same with either virus type in any location.

As with Type 1, sites and frequency of return bouts are variable. The initial episode can be so mild that a person does not realize that he or she has a herpetic infection. Years later when there is a recurrence of HSV it may be mistaken as an initial attack and lead to accusations of infidelity by a partner.

After the initial attack, the virus moves to nerve cells near the brain or spinal cord, remaining there until provoked by a trigger-menstrual period, fever, physical contact, or stress.

Both primary and recurrent infections may be preceded by a pain or unusual tenderness in the thigh, buttock, or genital area between one and several days before a sore or sores develop. This is called a prodrome.

How Are HSV Infections Diagnosed?

The clinical appearance of infection is often so characteristic that no further testing is necessary for confirmation. However, if the diagnosis is uncertain, as it may be when it occurs on the genitals or cervix, a specimen may be taken and submitted to the laboratory for analysis. Several laboratory techniques are available for diagnosis, including the staining of a smear, tissue culture, and blood tests for antibodies. More than one of these tests may be required to confirm the presence of herpes. Genital herpes can be mistaken for other diseases, including syphilis. A small number of women with genital herpes don't know they have it because it occurs on the cervix, which is not sensitive to pain.

How Are Herpes Infections Treated?

To date, no vaccine has been developed to prevent this infectious disease from occurring, but a new oral anti-viral medication, Acyclovir, has been developed for use in severe herpes infections. Although neither its long term effectiveness nor its long term side effects are known completely, it does appear that the drug will have a significant impact on the treatment of herpes infections.

Over the years, many other treatments for herpes simplex of the skin, ranging from plausible to bizarre, have been featured in newspaper headlines. According to results of scientific studies, none other than the Acyclovir has been proven effective or worthwhile.

Vitamin and mineral treatments, dye and light therapy, special diet and small pox vaccinations are all ineffective.

How Do You Prevent Transmission?

Between 2000,000 and 500,000 persons from all socioeconomic classes and ethnic groups "catch" genital herpes each year. The number of Type 1 infections is many times higher. So prevention of this disease, which is contagious before and during an outbreak, is important.

If tingling, burning, itching or tenderness – signs of a recurrence – are present in an area of the body where you have had a herpes infection, then that area should be kept away from other people. For persons with genital herpes, this means abstinence from sexual relations or oral/genital contact during the period of symptoms or active lesions.

Towels should be segregated and no underclothing or swimsuits should be exchanged.

What Are The Serious Implications of HSV?

- Eye Infections – The virus may infect the eye and lead to a condition called herpes keratitis. The inflammation results in the feeling that there is something in the eye, pain, sensitivity to light, and discharge. Without prompt treatment, scarring of the eye may result. Fortunately, there are two drugs available in ointment forms that are quite effective in preventing severe scarring in the cornea and in eliminating infection (idoxuridine and adenine arabinoside).
- Infections in Babies – A pregnant woman who has genital herpes at the time of delivery may transmit the virus to her baby as it passes through the birth canal, touching the affected area. The baby can die or suffer severe damage, particularly mental retardation. Women who know that they have had genital herpes or think they might have it

during their pregnancies should tell their physician so preventive measures can be taken.

A caesarian section is indicated for some patients. It is estimated that only half of the infants delivered through an infected vagina acquire the disease, but the ones that do are at risk for having a severe infection. The final decision on how to deliver the child is based on the relative risks for both mother and child.

Near the time of delivery, it is recommended that certain women be tested for vaginal infection. These include women with genital sores, those with a prior history of genital herpes, and those whose sexual partners have a history of genital herpes. A diagnosis, in most instances, can be made in a few days by taking vaginal and cervical scrapings for a viral culture and Papanicolaou smear.

The newborn can also be infected by exposure to the virus from non-genital lesions. If the mother or a person working in the nursery has active blisters on the lips or hands, the baby can become infected. Family members and friends with active HVS should not handle the newborn child.

Pregnant women should avoid sexual contact, especially late in pregnancy, with a partner who has active genital herpes. The use of condoms can be suggested for those who will not abstain. The risk of orogenital sex should be recognized. There is no evidence at the present time to suggest that infection of the infant with HSV Type 1 carries a different risk than infection with HSV Type 2. No special precautions need to be taken by the woman who has inactive herpes (genital or non-genital) at term. Since the mother's infection is not active, the infant is not at risk.

- HSV and the Seriously Ill – HSV can be life-threatening to the person who has cancer, the person who has had an organ transplant, or anyone who has some other major illness, because their immunity to infections has been drastically reduced.