
For Teens: Understanding Herpes

Herpes is a sexually transmitted infection (STI). It is also called a sexually transmitted disease (STD). It causes painful outbreaks of blisters and sores. It spreads through contact with an infected area that is usually a sore on the genitals, rectum, or mouth. Herpes can also spread even when you can't see any sores. There's no known cure for herpes, but treatment can help make outbreaks happen less often and be less severe. It can also help stop the spread of herpes to others.

Gender words are used here to talk about anatomy and health risk. Please use this information in a way that works best for you and your provider as you talk about your care.

What to look for

An outbreak can happen a few days or weeks after sex. Some people have only one outbreak in their lifetime> Others have several outbreaks a year.

- An outbreak begins with blisters on the penis, or in or around the vagina, mouth, or rectum.
- After a few days, the blisters break and leave painful sores. These may take days or weeks to heal.
- The first outbreak is often the worst. Later outbreaks may also be painful, but tend to be milder and heal faster.

Treatment

Antiviral medicines can help reduce how often outbreaks happen. They can also lessen pain, speed up healing, and help to prevent the spread of herpes to others. You can help sores heal faster by keeping them clean and dry.

To help stop the spread of the virus, don't have sex during an outbreak. Also, don't have oral sex if you have a cold sore. Cold sores are another form of the herpes virus (oral herpes). Oral herpes can be passed from the mouth to the genitals.

There is no known cure for herpes, but medicines can help you manage herpes symptoms. The herpes virus will always be in your body but may stay inactive (dormant) for periods of time. It can become active again due to certain triggers such as stress.

If you don't get treated

Herpes isn't deadly. But it does have risks:

- Having herpes increases the chance of catching HIV (the virus that causes AIDS). Herpes sores make it easier for the HIV virus to be passed during sex.
- If a person has an outbreak during pregnancy, herpes can be passed to the baby at birth. This can cause very serious problems or even be fatal for the baby.

Talk with your partner

Don't kiss or have sex if you or your partner has a herpes sore. And use latex condoms every time you have sex—even between outbreaks. Using latex condoms correctly and consistently can help reduce the spread of STIs.

It's important to talk with your partner about STIs and testing. If you don't feel safe talking face-to-face with your partner about testing, send a text or email. Or make a phone call instead. Ask someone for help if you're not safe.

It's also important to encourage your partner(s) to get treated. Otherwise they can pass the disease back to you or on to others.