

Herpes Simplex Virus: HSV-1 & HSV-2

Herpes simplex viruses -- more commonly known as herpes -- are categorized into two types: herpes type 1 (HSV-1, or oral herpes) and herpes type 2 (HSV-2, or genital herpes). Most commonly, herpes type 1 causes sores around the mouth and lips (sometimes called fever blisters or cold sores). HSV-1 can cause genital herpes, but most cases of genital herpes are caused by herpes type 2. In HSV-2, the infected person may have sores around the genitals or rectum. Although HSV-2 sores may occur in other locations, these sores usually are found below the waist.

What Causes Herpes Infections and Outbreaks?

Herpes simplex type 1, which is transmitted through oral secretions or sores on the skin, can be spread through kissing or sharing objects such as toothbrushes or eating utensils. In general, a person can only get herpes type 2 infection during sexual contact with someone who has a genital HSV-2 infection. It is important to know that both HSV-1 and HSV-2 can be spread even if sores are not present.

Pregnant women with genital herpes should talk to their doctor, as genital herpes can be passed on to the baby during childbirth.

For many people with the herpes virus, which can go through periods of being dormant, attacks (or outbreaks) can be brought on by the following conditions:

General illness (from mild illnesses to serious conditions)

Fatigue

Physical or emotional stress

Immunosuppression due to AIDS or such medications as chemotherapy or steroids

Trauma to the affected area, including sexual activity

Menstruation

What Are the Symptoms of Herpes Simplex?

Symptoms of herpes simplex virus typically appear as a blister or as multiple blisters on or around affected areas -- usually the mouth, genitals, or rectum. The blisters break, leaving tender sores.

How Is Herpes Simplex Diagnosed?

Often, the appearance of herpes simplex virus is typical and no testing is needed to confirm the diagnosis. If a health care provider is uncertain, herpes simplex can be diagnosed with lab tests, including DNA -- or PCR -- tests and virus cultures.

How Is Herpes Simplex Treated?

Although there is no cure for herpes, treatments can relieve the symptoms. Medication can decrease the pain related to an outbreak and can shorten healing time. They can also decrease the total number of outbreaks. Drugs including Famvir, Zovirax, and Valtrex are among the drugs used to treat the symptoms of herpes. Warm baths may relieve the pain associated with genital sores.

How Painful Is Herpes Simplex?

Some people experience very mild genital herpes symptoms or no symptoms at all. Frequently, people infected with the virus don't even know they have it. However, when it causes symptoms, it can be described as extremely painful. This is especially true for the first outbreak, which is often the worst. Outbreaks are described as aches or pains in or around the genital area or burning, pain, or difficulty urinating. Some people experience discharge from the vagina or penis.

Oral herpes lesions (cold sores) usually cause tingling and burning just prior to the breakout of the blisters. The blisters themselves can also be painful.

Can Herpes Be Cured?

There is no cure for herpes simplex. Once a person has the virus, it remains in the body. The virus lies inactive in the nerve cells until something triggers it to become active again.