

Herpes Simplex Virus types 1 &2 (HSV) FAQ

How did I get Herpes?

Herpes is transferred from contact with another person. Usually this occurs with skin to skin contact, but can also occur with mucus membrane contact, such as the vagina, anus and mouth on skin. Many people get HSV without being aware of it. Some of the time, the person with the virus may also not know they are carrying it and/or shedding it (the release of virus from skin without an outbreak).

Some people get HSV1 as a child by just being kissed by someone with HSV-1. Although herpes has a bad reputation, it is not always sexually transmitted.

What is the difference between Herpes-1 (HSV-1) and Herpes-2 (HSV-2)?

HSV-1 “usually” lives in a nerve bundle in the back of your neck. It often shows up as a sore on lips or mouth, but can appear on the face, nose, eyes and even fingers. HSV-1 CAN be transferred from the mouth to the genital region as well. This is why people who have HSV-1 must let their partners know of this risk before they engage in any skin to skin contact, even if the risk is small. HSV-1 is the cause of most genital herpes in people under the age of 30.

HSV2 lives in a bundle of nerves in the lower part of your back. Breakouts can occur anywhere in the boxer short region of someone’s body. It can exist in other areas, but it is very rare. HSV-2 usually has more outbreaks than HSV-1 and can cause a worse illness during the first outbreak.

Does Herpes go away?

Since herpes is a virus, once you get infected, then you have it for life. This is the case with ALL viruses, even the common cold. Our bodies form cells which help keep the virus at bay. With herpes, when your immune system is weakened such as from fighting another infection, stress, or even sunlight, it can trigger an outbreak.

Some people, with time, outbreaks can occur less frequently and become less severe.

HSV Symptoms

Will I always have symptoms?

Not everyone who gets infected goes on to have symptoms. It is common for people to come into contact with HSV and not ever know it. The virus lays dormant in your body after the initial infection and for some it can reactivate several times a year. This varies from person to person.

What we cannot be sure of is if someone does not have symptoms, that they do not pass it on to others. We always need to be clear with anyone we have skin to skin contact that there is a possibility of passing it without knowing it.

Are herpes symptoms permanent?

Herpes is not always “active”. The virus lies between a dormant phase, when it just lives in your nerve cells and an active phase. Sometimes in between these phases, and before an active phase, the virus “sheds” and releases an active virus on the skin. Some people can feel this as burning and tingling. There are no good studies that can predict how often and for how long this can occur.

How often can I expect symptoms?

While this varies from person to person, the average outbreaks for people with genital HSV-1 is less than one time a year. The average for genital HSV-2 is four to five times per year. Usually there are more outbreaks the first few years and with time they can become less severe and less frequent.

When am I at risk of giving this to others?

People are most contagious during an outbreak. In between the virus is dormant. Shedding is a stage in between when the virus becomes active on your skin without an outbreak. People may have mild or no symptoms during this time and it can be passed unknowingly to others. Most of the time, when you do not have an outbreak or feel a tingling or burning on your skin, you are not infectious.

What if I have HSV antibodies on my blood test but I have never had a known outbreak?

It is difficult to determine the proportion of HSV-infected people worldwide who have symptomatic disease, as symptoms may be mild or simply not recognized as herpes. It is believed that more people have HSV than are aware of it.

In addition, blood tests are not always accurate with high rates of false positives and negatives. It can take two weeks to six months after being exposed to herpes before it is detected in the blood. If the results are equivocal, then it is recommended to retest in 3-6 months.

Due to the fact that the blood test can be expensive and inaccurate, it is not typically included in a sexually transmitted disease evaluation unless you ask your provider for it specifically.

If you do come back positive for the antibodies, this means that you have been exposed to HSV and you may be passing it on to others.

Will there be a cure for Herpes?

While there is ongoing research for a cure, it remains uncertain at this point. There are studies using genetic engineering called Crisper, to gene-edit and deactivate the virus DNA.

What about vaccines?

There is ongoing research to find a vaccine to help prevent infection with the virus. They are still in pre-clinical trials as of 2020.

Managing Herpes

Anti-virals

Antiviral medications can help you manage the outbreaks and reduce the times of shedding.

They reduce the time the outbreaks last and make them less severe.

People who are on antivirals every day can reduce their outbreaks by 50-75%.

Some people take antivirals only when they have symptoms.

Talk with your medical provider which would be best for you.

The most common medications are Acyclovir and Valacyclovir. They are some of the safest medications with very few common side effects.

Oral (cold sores)

- avoid direct physical contact with people
- avoid sharing items that can pass the virus on such as cups, cutlery, make up or lip balm. You can still use communal facilities such as showers, toilets or swimming pools.
- don't participate in oral sex or kissing

wash your hands with soap and water thoroughly after applying antiviral cream or after touching the sore – avoid touching the sore unless you need to apply treatment

Genital Herpes

- Use a condom if you have been diagnosed with herpes but have no symptoms – the virus can still be passed on from direct skin contact to your partner despite the use of a condom
- Do not allow anyone to come into direct contact with your sores or blisters
- If you use sex toys, wash them thoroughly and put a condom on them

Lifestyle changes – you can adopt some lifestyle changes to help reduce the chance of outbreaks, but certain triggers in daily life are unavoidable. Some of the possible triggers are as follows:

- **Stress** – this is a common trigger and can be in the form of both emotional stress or physical (such as surgery). Excess stress weakens your immune system and can trigger both oral or genital herpes
- **Weak immune system** – you are more at risk of outbreaks if you have a weakened immune system. People with HIV infection, cancer or diabetes are at more risk
- **Sex** – genital friction during sex can trigger an outbreak. Ensure you use adequate lubrication during sex if this affects you
- **Fever** – this puts your body under physical stress. Oral herpes is more likely with fever and it can cause ‘fever blisters’ around your mouth
- **Tight clothing** – avoid tight clothing as this can cause genital irritation that may trigger an outbreak
- **Hormones** – some women report may have more frequent outbreaks before or after their periods due to fluctuations in hormone levels
- **Sunlight or the use of sunbeds** – it is not known how sunlight triggers an outbreak but if you are susceptible then use adequate sunscreen when exposed to sunlight. This mainly affects oral herpes
- **Avoiding triggers** – if you notice a pattern of trigger factors, then try to adjust your lifestyle or reduce your exposure to them

Diet

An excess intake of the amino acid *arginine* can trigger an outbreak.

- Avoid foods high in arginine, such as almonds or chocolate.

A diet rich in the amino acid *lysine* has been shown to help stop the herpes virus from multiplying and prevent outbreaks. Examples of lysine rich foods that can be effective include:

- **Dairy** – particularly yogurt and cheese
- **Meats and fish** – particularly high protein meats such as chicken and beef
- **Fruits** – particularly apples, apricots or pears
- **Vegetables** – particularly beans and cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli

Telling a partner about herpes:

- Many people do not understand what herpes is and how common it is. Honesty between partners is very important so you can discuss these issues openly. Many people will support and appreciate honesty
- What you say will depend on your personal style. There are good or bad times to bring up the topic. Talking about it just before sex is **not** a good idea.
- There are two main schools of thought: Disclosing it up front, or disclosing after one gets to know a person to build trust and comfort. There is no “right” way, but with time, most people can figure out what works best for them.
- Not disclosing is a consent violation.
- Try to pick a comfortable time when you are feeling good about yourself and have a positive attitude. This will allow time for you both to discuss it openly.
- While sharing your HSV status may feel scary, understanding that it is just one infection among many that you can pass along in your lifetime, helps reduce the shame and stigma often associated with this virus. We pass on viruses, bacteria and parasites to each other more than we are aware of.
- Even if you have a positive HSV antibody test, known through blood, but never have had a known outbreak, you must disclose this information as well.
- It's safe to assume more people have it than you think, and the shame prevents us from talking and sharing this information.

Emotional impact:

- Oral herpes (cold sores) can be uncomfortable and cause social embarrassment and genital herpes can also have an important impact on your quality of life and relationships
- With some time, most people adjust well to living with herpes. You may initially feel embarrassment, anger or fear, but it is important to give yourself time to adjust.
- Speak to your doctor if you feel you are very worried, anxious or depressed about your
- diagnosis. They may recommend you counselling or further support

Resources:

Something Positive For Positive People Podcast <https://www.spfpp.org/podcast>

Rae Kennedy [Positive Results](#). Her toolkit page has wonderful resources.

[Ella Dawson's TEDx talk on STIs](#)

Emily Depasse [Sex ELDucation](#)

Planned Parenthood Video [on how to disclose an STI](#)