

## What is Genital Herpes?

Current reports are that it is now an epidemic - about 500,000 people contracting it each year.

In the simplest terms, genital herpes is the same virus that causes cold sores on the mouth, except the sores occur on the genitals.

Genital Herpes is caused by the Herpes Simplex type II (HSV II) virus. It primarily affects the genital area and is transmitted by direct, skin-to-skin sexual contact, by genital contact (intercourse or masturbation) or oralgenital contact. It is not transmitted via toilet seats or public transportation.

It is possible for a person to contract genital herpes if the partner with oral herpes performs oral sex. Oral herpes can be transmitted to the genitals, and vice versa. Symptoms are similar.

Herpes Simplex I (HSV I) causes coldsores or fever blisters and can be transmitted to the genital area via oral sex. Conversely, genital herpes (HSV II) can be transmitted to a partner's mouth, resulting in your partner possibly contracting oral herpes (HSV I.)

The most important breakthrough in herpes diagnosis in the last few years is the development of serology tests that accurately tell you if you are a carrier of HSV-2.

Serology tests detect "antibodies" in the blood. These are substances produced by the immune system to fight off infection. If antibodies are found in the blood, it means your immune system has seen herpes virus infection in the past and fought it off. It also means that HSV is dormant in your nervous system and you are a carrier of the virus. Blood tests obviously don't require swabbing a lesion, so they can be done long after symptoms have faded.

HSV I and HSV II are two of five types of human herpes simplex viruses. The other three cause chicken pox, mononucleosis and shingles. The virus moves into healthy cells, reprogramming them to work for the virus. It remains in the body in some form for life, however, with time; the body eventually becomes more efficient in suppressing it.

It is a recurrent viral infection and presently there is no cure. To kill the virus means killing the nerve fibers it inhabits, which makes finding a cure difficult, but not impossible. And it's definitely a manageable disease. Recurring outbreaks can happen as often as a few times a month or as rarely as a few times a year.

Most of the time, the virus will remain dormant and will not be contagious. However, the virus can become active when the body's immune system is weakened, whether by stress, disease or environmentally related factors.

Most people infected with genital herpes, about 85%, are asymptomatic, or they do not notice or report symptoms. Recent studies say that the virus can be spread even during periods of asymptomatic "shedding" - when the virus is present and replicating itself, but not to the degree there are visible signs or symptoms.

The CDC recommends prophylactic treatment (daily suppressive therapy) for people with asymptomatic serologic positive herpes type 2, who may spread the virus to others.