

they get symptoms. Your doctor or nurse will explain what may be the best option for you.

### **How can I avoid passing genital herpes to a partner?**

Using condoms and taking antiviral medicine can reduce the chances of passing on genital herpes. It is best to avoid sex during an outbreak.

In some cases, your partner will be offered a blood test. This is to see if their body has been exposed to the infection before. You can discuss this further with your doctor or nurse.

### **What if my partner tells me they had genital herpes in the past?**

If your partner tells you they have had genital herpes in the past, it is a good idea to visit your doctor or nurse to discuss this.

You should avoid having sex with your partner if they have an outbreak.

A blood test can show if you have been exposed to herpes in the past. You can discuss this further with your doctor or nurse.

### **Is it ok to have sex again after an outbreak?**

Yes. Talk with your doctor or nurse about what you can do to reduce the risk of passing genital herpes to someone else. It is important to avoid sexual contact with someone when you have an outbreak.

### **What happens if my genital herpes is left untreated?**

Genital herpes will heal up even if you are not treated. However, this can take longer than if you start having treatment soon after developing sores.

### **If I had genital herpes and get pregnant, what should I do?**

In most cases, there will be no problem with the pregnancy.

If you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, tell your doctor of your history of herpes. Sometimes antiviral medication will be recommended towards the end of the pregnancy. In most cases a history of herpes has no impact on how your baby should be delivered. Your doctor or nurse will discuss this with you.

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**Sexual Health &  
Crisis Pregnancy Programme**

**Plain  
English**  
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## A guide to **Genital Herpes (HSV)**

[sexualwellbeing.ie](http://sexualwellbeing.ie)



## What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is a viral infection caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). There are two HSV types: type 1 and type 2. Type 2 is most commonly associated with genital infection. Type 1 has also been found to cause genital infection but is more commonly associated with oral herpes ('cold sores').

The two viruses are very similar and both can cause blisters or ulcers. When this occurs on the face it is called a 'cold sore' and when it occurs in the genital area it is called 'genital herpes' and sometimes 'anogenital herpes'.

## How common is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is common in Ireland. It is mostly diagnosed in young women.

## How do I get genital herpes?

The herpes virus (HSV) is transmitted by skin-to-skin contact, kissing, vaginal and anal sex (genital contact), oral sex (mouth to genital contact) and sharing sex toys. It can also be passed from mother to baby during delivery.

Many people who have and pass on the virus do not know they have herpes. It is possible to carry the virus without having any symptoms.

Sometimes you can catch herpes when your sexual partner has no visible sores or symptoms. This is because the virus can become active on the skin without causing any visible blisters or sores.

## You cannot catch genital herpes from:

- towels
- swimming pools and saunas
- toilet seats.

## What symptoms would I have with genital herpes?

Many people with the herpes virus do not experience any symptoms when they are first infected and, as a result, do not know that they have it.

If you do get symptoms, your first episode (sometimes referred to as an attack or an outbreak) will usually be the most severe. It usually takes between two and 12 days after contact with the virus for the first symptoms of genital herpes to appear.

Symptoms are multiple spots or red bumps around the genital area. These can be very painful. In time, these swellings can break open and form sores or ulcers which gradually crust over, forming new skin as they heal. As well as having painful ulcers or blisters, you may have swollen glands in your groin, flu-like symptoms and a feeling of being unwell. You may also feel pain when passing urine.

## How can I be tested for genital herpes?

If you have visible blisters, the doctor or nurse will take a swab from the sore for testing and sometimes may also take a blood sample. The blood test for herpes simplex is looking for the body's reaction to previous infection with herpes. Clinics don't routinely do this blood test on people who have no symptoms. However, the herpes

blood test can be helpful in certain situations. You can discuss this with your doctor or nurse.

## How is genital herpes treated?

If you have symptoms of genital herpes for the first time, the treatment usually involves antiviral tablets, to help speed up the healing process, and sometimes painkillers.

Your pain can usually be managed with simple painkillers and a local anaesthetic (numbing) cream. You will usually need to take the antiviral medicine for 3 or 5 days.

## Can genital herpes come back?

After the initial infection, the virus can remain dormant in the nerve cells in the affected area of your body. The dormant virus can reactivate and cause you to suffer recurrences.

If genital herpes does come back, you will usually only suffer minor symptoms and these will heal up quickly, even without treatment. However, a small number of people will find that recurrences can become troublesome.

Genital herpes is more likely to come back in people who have been infected with the type 2 virus than the type 1 virus.

## What if I get a lot of outbreaks?

Some people may be put on antiviral medication for 6 months to a year if they get a lot of outbreaks.

Other people who occasionally get recurrent episodes just take the antiviral medication when