



**Think** about it  
**Talk** about it  
**Protect** yourself  
 and your partner

**H**erpes Simplex Virus (HSV) is a very common virus that causes oral and genital herpes. There are two types: HSV-1 and HSV-2. The virus most often lives in your mouth, nose, eyes, ears, anus, and genitals. Sometimes, herpes sores can show up on your hands, breasts, or buttocks. It is very easy to give HSV to someone else.

- Oral herpes, usually caused by HSV-1, most often affects the lips, nose, or inside of the mouth. People often refer to these sores as “fever blisters” or “cold sores.”
- Genital herpes is usually caused by HSV-2 and is most often found on the penis, vagina, and anus.

If you have HSV, you are not alone. Anywhere from 50 to 80 percent of Americans are thought to have oral herpes and 20 to 25 percent genital herpes.

## How do I know if I have HSV?

Many people with HSV have no symptoms, or it may show up as a single blister or a cluster of blisters. It can take two days to three weeks for symptoms to appear. The blisters may burn, itch, or hurt. Usually, they turn into open sores, crust over, and heal in one to three weeks.

The first outbreak is usually the worst. You may have a fever, swollen glands, a headache, or muscle aches. But some people have such mild symptoms that they don’t even notice them.

Often, a person with herpes will notice tingling or itching at the site of infection a few days or a few hours before an outbreak. This is called “prodrome.” It is a warning that the virus is rising to the surface of the skin. You can transmit HSV during prodrome, even before you have any sores. Avoid sexual contact if you notice any of these symptoms.

## How do you get HSV?

You get HSV when healthy skin touches or rubs skin that is infected with HSV. This can happen whether or not a sore is present. Kissing, oral sex, and sexual intercourse are the most common ways to transmit HSV.

The virus also can be moved from one body part to another, so it’s important to wash your hands immediately after touching a sore. For instance, if you touch a herpes sore on your mouth, and then

touch your genitals, you can get herpes infection on your genitals.

There are no reported cases of herpes being transmitted from toilets, hot tubs, or towels.

## How do you test for HSV?

The best time to test for HSV is when there are sores or blisters on a person’s body. If you notice a blister or sore, see your doctor or health care professional immediately before it heals so the sore can be tested for HSV. Blood tests for HSV antibodies are not very useful because most people carry antibodies to HSV—often from having had cold sores in childhood. The blood test will only tell you whether the virus is HSV-1 or HSV-2, not where herpes sores will appear.

## What is the treatment?

Right now, HSV can’t be cured, but it can be treated. Once you are infected with HSV, the virus will always be in your body. However, medications can relieve the symptoms, make the outbreaks shorter, and prevent future outbreaks. Talk to your doctor or other health care professional if you have frequent outbreaks.

## How can I avoid outbreaks?

The first outbreak is usually the worst. Outbreaks often occur when your immune system is weak, such as when you are sick or under a lot of stress. Staying healthy by eating well, getting plenty of rest, not smoking, and lowering your stress level may help prevent outbreaks. If you get herpes sores on your mouth,

using sunscreen and staying out of the sun may also help prevent outbreaks.

### What if I am pregnant?

Herpes infection is usually not passed to a newborn during delivery. Genital herpes can be a problem if sores are present during labor. If this happens, your doctor may recommend a Cesarean delivery. Sometimes, pregnant women may take medications before the due date to prevent a genital herpes outbreak during delivery.

HSV can be a serious problem if a woman gets genital herpes for the first time during the third trimester of her pregnancy. The unborn baby can become infected and will need treatment right after birth. During the third trimester of pregnancy, HSV-negative women should use condoms during sex or avoid sex if their partners have herpes. All pregnant women should inform their doctors of any history of genital herpes.

### If I have HSV, should I get tested for other STDs?

Since genital HSV is transmitted sexually, you should discuss other STD screening with your doctor or health care professional. They may recommend testing for other STDs, including chlamydia, HIV, syphilis, gonorrhea, and hepatitis B and C.

### What if I'm under 18?

If you are between the ages of 12 and 18, you can be treated for sexually transmitted diseases in California and some other states without your parents' permission. California state law requires that Kaiser Permanente protect your privacy.

### How can I protect myself and my partner from HSV?

Many people who have herpes don't know that they have it, or are embarrassed to tell their partners. It is very important that partners talk honestly about herpes so they can protect each other. Condoms do not protect 100 percent against genital herpes, but they do help. Besides, condoms do prevent many other STDs. Avoid sex completely during genital herpes outbreaks, and avoid oral sex, kissing, and sharing cups or eating utensils during oral herpes outbreaks.

### What's the best way to cope with HSV?

It's natural to be upset when you find out that you have herpes. You may worry that you won't be able to find sexual partners. But there are lots of things you can do to lead a happy and healthy life with HSV. For most healthy adults, HSV is not a serious health problem. Talk with your doctor and check out the resources below for more information on controlling herpes.

#### Additional resources

- Herpes Resource Center  
[www.ashastd.org/hrc](http://www.ashastd.org/hrc)
- Herpes.org  
[www.herpes.org](http://www.herpes.org)
- National STD Hotline  
1-800-227-8922
- Connect to our Web site at [kp.org](http://kp.org) to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.