

The most important measure is to avoid sexual contact when you have signs of symptoms of genital herpes although, as explained, in some cases the virus can still be passed on when there are no obvious signs of infection (this is known as asymptomatic viral shedding). Using latex condoms can also reduce the risk of transmitting herpes by around 50%.

Suppressive therapy (continuous use over a period of months or years) with valaciclovir has been shown to significantly reduce the risk of transmitting genital herpes to an uninfected partner, when used with safer sex practices.

Where can I find further information about genital herpes?

Your doctor or other healthcare provider can provide further information about genital herpes.

The International Herpes Alliance (IHA) is a global association of patient support organisations and health professionals with an interest in herpes. It offers a wide range of patient-friendly, downloadable materials on a variety of issues related to herpes. The IHA website, www.herpesalliance.org, also provides links to other useful organisations.

The following organisations have made educational contributions to the IHA to produce this poster for the promotion of herpes awareness.

The IHA does not endorse any commercial product but makes information available about herpes products that have met with the approval of recognised herpes medical experts.

International Herpes Week is supported by an educational grant from GSK and endorsed by the American Social Health Association (ASHA)



Treatment and testing – better than ever

Genital herpes is very common and can affect anyone who is sexually active. It is estimated that around one in five people is infected in some countries. However, you may be surprised to know that up to 90% of those who carry the HSV virus are completely unaware of the fact and so may unknowingly infect other people.

In many cases, the only way to be sure whether you have genital herpes is to be tested, and accurate and reliable tests are now widely available in most countries. Treatments have also improved in recent years and are now more effective and more convenient to take than ever before.

The International Herpes Alliance (IHA) has produced this leaflet to encourage people to be tested for herpes and to take advantage of modern treatments, if they have troublesome symptoms. It is part of a series of activities during International Herpes Week 2007, which have the theme 'Treatment and testing – better than ever.'

“Treatments and tests for genital herpes have never been better, so if you think you could have been infected with the herpes virus, now is the time to seek medical advice”

What causes herpes?

Facial herpes (cold sores) and genital herpes are caused by two closely related types of herpes simplex virus. HSV-1, the most common strain, usually causes facial herpes, while HSV-2 is more frequently associated with genital herpes. However, cross infection between the two types of virus does occur and in some regions of the world, genital herpes infections are increasingly caused by HSV-1.

Surely I would know if I had genital herpes?

Unfortunately, the answer is ‘no’. Up to 90% of those affected are unaware that they carry the HSV virus. 20% of people infected with HSV-2 experience no signs or symptoms at all, while 60% of infected individuals have such mild or non-specific symptoms that they do not realise they have been infected or assume the symptoms are caused by something else. In many cases, the only way to be sure whether you have genital herpes is to be tested.

Why is it important to be tested?

This is important for a number of reasons. First, if you test positive for genital herpes and you experience troublesome symptoms, you can take advantage of a range of effective treatment options. Second, genital herpes can be spread to sexual partners even when the person carrying the virus shows no symptoms, so many people infect others without ever being aware of the fact. If you know you have genital herpes, you can take steps to protect sexual partners and reduce the risk of transmission. Third, it is important for women who are pregnant or planning to become pregnant to be aware of their herpes status, because in rare cases, it is possible to pass the virus onto a newborn baby, which can cause potentially serious health complications.

What tests are available for genital herpes?

Reliable and accurate tests for herpes are now widely available. Viral cultures (swabs) are recommended when visible symptoms are present and can give a definitive diagnosis of herpes infection. Blood tests can be used when there are no obvious symptoms. It is important to be tested for both the HSV-1 and HSV-2 strains of herpes virus. The most accurate blood tests detect IgG antibodies and can show whether a person is infected with the HSV-1 or HSV-2 virus, although they cannot always distinguish between oral and genital infection.

Many older tests, particularly those that test for IgM antibodies, are less reliable. For an accurate result, it is important to wait for 3–4 months after exposure to the virus, and whenever possible, the result should be discussed with a qualified health professional in a face-to-face appointment so that any questions or concerns can be dealt with immediately. Further information about diagnostic tests can be found on the IHA website in the ‘All about herpes’ section.

What treatments are available for genital herpes?

Although there is no known cure for genital herpes, treatments are better than ever before. Antiviral treatment (acyclovir, famciclovir and valaciclovir) can reduce the frequency, severity and duration of outbreaks. It can be taken for a few days at the first sign of an outbreak (episodic therapy) and, in the case of famciclovir, a new single-day treatment option is now available. For those who wish to reduce the chances of further outbreaks or limit viral shedding (periods of time when the virus is present on the skin) antiviral therapy can be taken on a daily basis for a number of months or years (suppressive therapy).

How can I reduce the risk of passing genital herpes onto my partner?

It is usually advisable to tell your partner if you have genital herpes so you can discuss which risk reduction measures you wish to take.