

# Herpes: genital herpes

## What is genital herpes?

*Genital herpes* is a form of sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the *herpes simplex* virus. It produces painful ulcers on and around the genitals of both sexes.

## How is it caught?

It can be caught by direct contact through vaginal, anal or oral sex. Rarely is it transferred to the genitals from other areas of the body by the fingers, and there is no proof that it can be transferred from places or objects such as toilet seats, towels, spas or swimming pools.

### Note

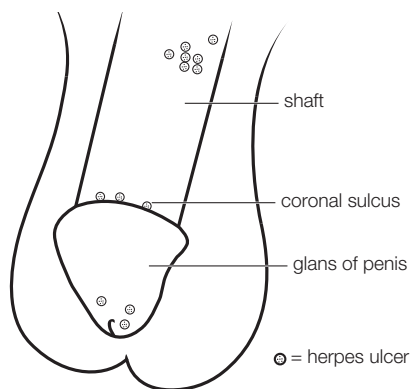
Contact is from person to person.

## What are the symptoms?

With the first attack there is a tingling or burning feeling in the genital area and possibly a 'flu-like' illness. A crop of small blisters then appears; these burst after 24 hours to leave small, red, painful ulcers. The ulcers form scabs and heal after a few days. The first attack, which is the most painful, lasts about 2 weeks.

### Males

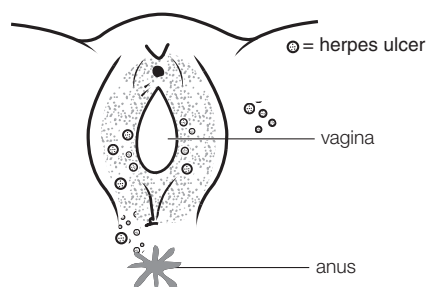
The virus usually affects the shaft of the penis, but can involve the glans and coronal sulcus, and the anus.



Usual sites of blisters in males

### Females

Blisters develop around the opening of, and just inside, the vagina and sometimes on the cervix and anus.



Usual sites of blisters in females

## Does it recur?

After the first infection, the herpes virus remains deep in the nerves that supply the affected area of the skin. Half of those who have the first episode have recurrent attacks; the others have no recurrences.

Fortunately attacks gradually become milder, less frequent and usually stop eventually. Recurrences after many months or years can be precipitated by menstruation, sexual intercourse, masturbation, skin irritation or emotional stress.

It can be a nasty problem if it develops during pregnancy. Inform your obstetrician if you have a history of genital herpes.

## What should you do?

If you think you have herpes, see your doctor or attend a clinic specialising in STI. You should not have intercourse during an attack, because you are likely to transmit the infection to your partner.

## What is the treatment?

- Rest and relax as much as possible. Warm salt baths can be soothing.
- Antiviral ointments can help if they are used as soon as symptoms start. Other agents that help are Betadine lotion or 10% silver nitrate solution.
- Icepacks or hot compresses can help.
- Pain-killers such as aspirin or paracetamol give some relief.
- If urination is painful, pass urine under water in a warm bath.
- Keep the sores dry; dabbing with alcohol or using warm air from a hairdryer can help.
- Leave the rash alone after cleaning and drying; do not poke or prod the sores.
- Wear loose clothes and cotton underwear. Avoid tight jeans.
- Your doctor can prescribe a special antiviral drug. The drug is most effective if started on the first day of the infection.

## How can it be prevented?

Spread of the disease can be prevented only by avoiding sexual contact during an attack. If you are not sure whether you are infected or not, use a condom (however, this is not absolutely protective during oral sex) and wash your genitals with soap and water immediately after sex. Condoms should always be used where a partner has a history of infection. Antiviral drugs can be used to prevent frequent recurrent attacks. Make sure your sexual contacts are informed about your problem.