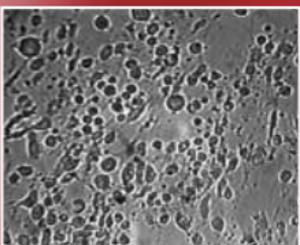


**Sexually Transmitted Diseases**



# Genital herpes

**Questions & Answers**



Generalitat de Catalunya  
**Agència de Salut Pública  
de Catalunya**

## What is genital herpes?

This is a widespread sexually transmitted infection caused by the herpes simplex viruses type 2 (HSV-2) or type 1 (HSV-1), which usually causes cold sores (oral herpes).

It can affect the genital area, the rectum, and the anus, and sometimes buttocks and legs; its most characteristic presentation is episodes with lesions: blisters and painful sores (outbreaks).

Infection is lifelong and may go unnoticed. In some people infection causes typical outbreaks, but in some cases, they either not appear or are mild and can easily be confused with other skin conditions.

**Genital herpes significantly increases the risk of HIV acquisition.**

## How is it transmitted?

**Easily through sex by contact with herpes lesions,** but also by contact with the skin, mucous membranes and secretions from the affected area.

Genital infection with HSV-2 is usually transmitted during anal or vaginal sex, and infection by HSV-1 through oral sex.

The virus may cause infection when it breaches the mucous membranes (genitals, rectum or mouth) or even through skin if it is damaged with a small crack.

**From mother to child especially during birth.**

The risk of infection is high (30-50%) if the mother acquires genital herpes late in pregnancy.

### In addition...

- Oral sex is cause of the rapid increase of genital herpes caused by type 1.
- Women are more susceptible to infection than men.
- **The virus is transmitted intermittently by the infected person, showing sometimes – but not always – lesions or symptoms of the infection.** The majority of infections are acquired from a person with no symptoms or mild symptoms, and who doesn't know he/she is infected.

## What are the symptoms?

Signs and symptoms can vary considerably between infected individuals; only 20% shows typical signs and symptoms or outbreaks:

- Clusters of painful lesions on the genitals or rectum and anus.
- Sometimes with fever, muscle aches, and tender inguinal lymph nodes.

Signs and symptoms disappear within a few weeks, although since infection persists can be repeated periodically. Usually they tend to become less severe than the first outbreak and less frequent over the years.

### In addition...

In the newborn the infection can cause severe damage to the brain or can be generalized.

## How can I tell if I have genital herpes?

It can be recognised when typical signs and symptoms are present. Diagnosis is confirmed through a laboratory test detecting the virus in a sample from a lesion, collected with a swab.

There is also a blood test that looks for antibodies against infections caused by herpes virus. It's only useful in specific situations.

## Can genital herpes be cured?

There's no cure for the infection. **Oral antiviral drugs for the treatment of herpes outbreaks** can help to speed the healing of lesions and shorten the outbreaks.

Long-term treatment prevents or reduces the frequency of outbreaks; while the treatment is taking place, transmission of the virus is reduced.

### In addition...

Infected persons can learn what it is and how to take care of genital herpes and tell their partners.

Partners will only be treated if symptoms occur and if necessary.

## How can genital herpes be prevented?

Unless both partners know they are not infected, the following is necessary to reduce the risk of acquiring genital herpes and other sexually transmitted infections:

- **Use condoms during vaginal, anal and oral sex**, and also a latex condom for oral sex. Correct condom use reduces – but doesn't suppress – the risk of genital herpes transmission, because it can't cover all affected areas. It is advisable to avoid having sexual intercourse during a herpes outbreak.
- **Avoid having sex under the influence of alcohol or drugs**, as this decreases the perception of risk and may lead to not using condom or using it incorrectly.
- **Limiting the number of sexual partners** is also a preventive measure.

### In addition...

#### To reduce complications, you should:

- **Consult your health professionals in case of warning signs of sexually transmitted infections** (lesions on the skin or mucous membranes, especially around the genital area, abnormal genital secretions or a burning sensation when urinating), so they can assess the seriousness, and you should **avoid having sex** until you know the result.
- **Do tests to detect other sexually transmitted infections** (HIV, syphilis...), even if you do not have the symptoms. This **may be advisable if you have been diagnosed with genital herpes** or any other sexually transmitted infection. In any case, you should do this if there is any risk of having been infected.
- **Prevent HSV infection in newborns.** It's important that women avoid contracting herpes during pregnancy. If either you or your partner had genital herpes, you should consult health professionals, who will give you specific recommendations.

# Signs and symptoms of genital herpes

## Genital infection caused by HSV-1 or HSV-2 produces:

- In 80% of cases, mild or no recognizable symptoms in the genitals: mild cracks, itching, irritation or localized pain without lesions, etc., or either the person doesn't experience any symptoms.
- In 20% of cases evident symptoms (**outbreak**).

## 1st outbreak\*

Duration	Likely signs and symptoms
<b>3 weeks</b>	<b>3-12 days after the infectious contact:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Initially:</b> general malaise, headache, fever, muscle aches.</li><li>• <b>Multiple painful genital lesions</b>, evolving from vesicles to ulcers and scabs before healing.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- In women: on the vulva, cervix.</li><li>- In men: on the penis and, sometimes, testicles.</li><li>- Sometimes: on the buttocks, legs or area near the anus, on the anus and rectum.</li></ul></li><li>• <b>With tender inguinal lymph nodes and, in some cases, pain when urinating.</b></li></ul> <p>A previous oral herpes (infection by HSV-1) causes genital outbreak by new infection with HSV-2 becomes less severe and shorter lasting.</p>



\* In some people the first outbreak is a consequence of the reactivation of an old infection (months to years) without previous symptoms.

## 2nd and subsequent outbreaks

Duration	Likely signs and symptoms
<b>10 dies</b>	Usually, in the same location or around the first outbreak: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Small and painful genital lesion</b> similar to the first outbreak in a smaller area.</li><li>• Sometimes, burning, itching and tingling, up to 48 hours before lesions appear.</li></ul>

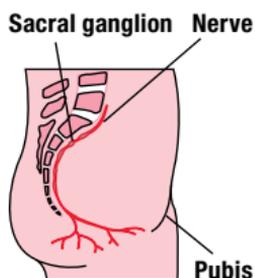


During the year after the first outbreak:

- Infection with HSV-2 causes 4-6 outbreaks in 70-90% of cases.
- Infection with HSV-1 causes a new outbreak in 20-50% of cases.

**The frequency of outbreaks lessens over time.**

N. B.: Most relevant and likely data on genital herpes is summarized on the table.



Viruses lie forever in certain groups of nerve cells (sacral ganglia) in the affected area. Viruses come back periodically to the skin and mucous membranes causing episodes of transmission of the virus with symptoms (outbreaks or others less evident) or without.

The first years of infection with HSV-2, transmission can occur in 10-20% of days.

# Sexually Transmitted Diseases

## Don't forget that:

- An individual can be infected and not know about it.
- The use of condoms effectively reduces the risk of acquiring a sexually transmitted infection.
- Early diagnosis and treatment prevent most of the complications of sexually transmitted diseases.

If you have any doubts or if you think that your behaviour puts you at risk of infection, visit one of the public health system's health centres, sexual and reproductive health units or sexually transmitted disease units.

You can also call:

**SIDA**  
**900 212222**  
Informació confidencial i gratuïta

**061** **CatSalut**  
Respon

**canalsalut.gencat.cat**