

# Herpes Fact Sheet

## **Herpes is caused by a virus**

Herpes simplex virus (HSV) causes herpes. This virus has two types, HSV 1 and HSV 2. HSV 1 (oral herpes) usually causes infections on the lips or mouth (cold sores or fever blisters). HSV 2 (genital herpes) usually causes sores and blisters in the genital area. However, virus from the mouth can infect the genitals and virus from the genitals can infect the mouth. Herpes virus can also infect other parts of the body. Both viruses can live inside nerve cells and cause symptoms that occur again and again.

## **Almost everyone has had HSV 1**

Fifty to 90% of adults have had HSV 1 infection. Infections in children are often mild or cause no symptoms at all. Even if you have had HSV 1, you can still catch HSV 2.

## **Herpes infection is spread from person-to-person. You can get infected:**

- By direct contact (touching, kissing, rubbing) with the sores or blisters
- By having sex (vaginal, anal, or oral), especially if not using a condom
- From mother to baby during childbirth

## **Signs and symptoms of herpes to look for:**

- Painful small bumps on the lips or mouth that turn into blisters or open sores
- Painful blisters or sores on or around the penis, vagina, labia, or rectum

Symptoms start about 2 to 12 days after contact with the virus. The first time a person has these symptoms is usually the worst. Herpes skin lesions may come back, usually occurring at the same place as before. Herpes can come back when a person is stressed, has a fever, gets too much sun, or at other times when the body is weakened. Herpes is also more common near the time when a woman has her period. The sores caused by HSV last for about a week or two.

## **Treatment with antiviral medications may help genital herpes**

Several medications may reduce shedding of the virus, diminish pain, speed up healing time, and decrease the number of times that the lesions come back. A doctor must prescribe these medications.

## **Prevent herpes infections by avoiding contact with sores and by good hygiene**

- If you have herpes blisters or sores on your lips, do not get your mouth close to babies. Wash your hands very well before touching babies.

- If you have herpes blisters or sores on your lips, do not kiss anyone on the mouth or genitals.
- Keep toys clean and limit saliva contact among children.
- Wear gloves if touching open herpes lesions.
- Cover herpes lesions and wash hands often.
- Excluding students or employees with herpes from schools or child care centers is not usually necessary.
- If you are pregnant and have herpes, it is very important to tell your doctor

Herpes infection in babies can be very serious. Newborns can get severe infections that lead to mental retardation or death. A doctor may recommend a cesarean section to avoid exposing the baby to the virus during birth.