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CDC-INFO Contact Center
1-800-CDC-INFO
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If you have been diagnosed with any sexually transmitted disease (STD), your sexual partner(s) should be tested for HIV and other STDs, even if they have no symptoms. If you have been diagnosed with any STD, including HIV, you should have a blood test in three months to detect blood-borne infections you might have contracted at the time you tested positive for any STD.

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HERPES

Facts & Info

What is Herpes?

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the herpes simplex viruses type 1 (HSV-1) or type 2 (HSV-2). Most genital herpes is caused by HSV-2.



How do you get herpes?

Normally, HSV-1 is the cause of oral herpes (fever blisters or cold sores), and HSV-2 is the cause of genital herpes. However, it is important to know that both herpes HSV-1 and HSV-2 can occur on both the genitals and mouth area.

HSV-1 and HSV-2 are released from the sores the viruses cause, but the virus can also be released between outbreaks from skin that does not appear to have a sore. Herpes can be spread through vaginal, oral and anal sex. It can also be passed through skin to skin contact, kissing, and from mother to child during childbirth, although the risk of passing the disease during childbirth is low.

Can herpes be prevented?

The only way to avoid sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is to not have vaginal, anal, or oral sex. If you are having sex, you can lower your chances of getting herpes if you limit your number of sex partners and use a latex condom correctly every time you have sex. However, areas not covered by the condom can contain the virus, so condoms do not provide total protection from the virus.

How is herpes diagnosed?

A health care provider can diagnose herpes by visual inspection if an outbreak is present, or by taking a sample from the sores and testing it in a lab. Between outbreaks, HSV can be diagnosed by a blood test. Blood tests, which detect antibodies to HSV-1 or HSV-2, can be helpful, but the results are not always straightforward.

How is herpes treated?

There is no cure for herpes, but antiviral medications can shorten and prevent outbreaks. Daily suppressive therapy can reduce transmission to partners.

What are the symptoms of herpes?

- HSV-1 typically causes cold sores/fever blisters on the mouth, and HSV-2 typically causes genital sores/blisters. Both viruses can cause sores in either area, and many people have no symptoms.
- An outbreak can start as red bumps and then turn into painful blisters/sores. The first outbreak may lead to flu-like symptoms, such as fever, headaches and swollen glands.

What happens if I don't get treated?

Genital herpes can cause on-and-off painful genital sores in many adults, and can be severe in people with weakened immune systems. Regardless of how severe the symptoms, genital herpes often causes mental distress.

Genital herpes can lead to potentially fatal infections in babies. It is important to avoid getting herpes during pregnancy, because a new infection during late pregnancy poses a greater risk of passing the virus to the baby. If a woman has active genital herpes at delivery, a C-section can be performed to make it less likely to pass herpes from mother to baby.

Herpes can place people at greater risk of getting HIV, and it can make people living with HIV more likely to spread HIV.

How common is herpes?

Herpes is a very common sexually transmitted disease. Nationwide, more than one out of six people aged 14 to 49 years have genital herpes.

When will the symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear within one to 30 days or longer after contact.