

Sexually Transmitted Diseases/Infections

Herpes Simplex Virus Infections Genital Herpes

Genital herpes is a chronic, life-long viral infection caused by Herpes Simplex Virus-1 (HSV-1) and Herpes Simplex Virus-2 (HSV-2). Most cases of recurrent genital herpes are caused by HSV-2. The majority of genital herpes infections are transmitted by persons who are unaware that they have the infection or who are asymptomatic when transmission occurs.

Generally, a person can only get genital herpes during sexual contact with someone who has a genital HSV-2 infection. Transmission can occur from an infected partner who does not have a visible sore and may not know that he or she is infected. HSV-1 can cause genital herpes, but it more commonly causes infections of the mouth and lips, so-called “fever blisters.” HSV-1 infection of the genitals can be caused by oral-genital or genital-genital contact with a person who has HSV-1 infection. Genital HSV-1 outbreaks recur less regularly than genital HSV-2 outbreaks.

Most people infected with HSV-2 are not aware of their infection. When signs do occur, they typically appear as one or more blisters on or around the genitals or rectum. The blisters break, leaving tender ulcers (sores) that may take two to four weeks to heal the first time they occur. Typically, another outbreak can appear weeks or months after the first, but it almost always is less severe and shorter than the first outbreak. Although the infection can stay in the body indefinitely, the number of outbreaks tends to decrease over a period of years.

Health care providers can diagnose genital herpes by visual inspection if the outbreak is typical, and by taking a sample from the sore(s) and testing it in a laboratory. HSV infections can be diagnosed between outbreaks by the use of a blood test. Blood tests, which detect antibodies to HSV-1 or HSV-2 infection, can be helpful, although the results are not always clear-cut.

There is no treatment that can cure herpes, but antiviral medications can shorten and prevent outbreaks during the period of time the person takes the medication. In addition, daily suppressive therapy for symptomatic herpes can reduce transmission to partners.

This common infection is not reportable under the current N.C. Administrative Code.

For more information:

- CDC genital herpes information, www.cdc.gov/std/Herpes/default.htm
- CDC STD Treatment Guidelines 2010 – Diseases characterized by genital, anal, or perianal ulcers, www.cdc.gov/std/treatment/2010/genital-ulcers.htm#hsv