

Get the Facts About Genital Herpes. Know Your Risks.

It is estimated that 50 million Americans have genital herpes (GH). That means that 1 out of 5 adults is infected with the herpes virus. Anyone who is sexually active, even with just one person, can get GH, and there are up to one million new cases each year. In fact, GH is now more common than diabetes or asthma. This guide provides information about GH and offers suggestions that can help protect you and your partner. It is not intended to replace a discussion with your healthcare provider.

Could you have genital herpes and not know it?

Almost 90% of people with genital herpes don't know they have it. Many of them may have symptoms they don't recognize or confuse with something else. Others don't have GH symptoms at all, but may still be contagious. In fact, most people get GH from someone who is unaware they have it or has no signs of an outbreak. Standard STD tests and Pap smears don't check for GH, a fact that many people don't realize.

How do you know if you have genital herpes?

A simple blood test is the best way to know if you have the virus. If you think that you may have been exposed to GH, you should ask your healthcare provider about being tested specifically for the herpes virus. If you are having symptoms or believe that you were recently infected, your healthcare provider can recommend the most appropriate test for you.

GH is widespread. Often people have symptoms they don't recognize or confuse with something else. Others don't have symptoms at all. If you have the virus, you can pass on GH regardless of whether you have symptoms or not. In fact, herpes is often spread when no signs or symptoms are present.

If you do find out that you have GH, talk to your partner about getting tested too. It's difficult to know exactly when you were first infected.

Why should you care if you have genital herpes?

Even if you aren't bothered by physical symptoms, there are several important reasons to find out if you do have the virus.

- You could be spreading GH to others without knowing it.
- Although most women with GH have healthy babies, there is a risk of spreading the virus to the baby (neonatal herpes). This is especially true if you were infected while you were pregnant. Neonatal herpes may lead to serious complications such as seizures, blindness, developmental delay, and death.
- The risk of getting HIV is up to 3 times greater for people with GH.

What can you do to reduce your risk?

If you choose to be sexually active, there are several things you can do to protect your partner.

If you don't have GH

- Always use a condom when you have sex to help protect yourself.
- While herpes is often spread without symptoms, it is especially important to avoid sexual contact when symptoms are present.
- Discuss your sexual health openly with your partner.

If you do have GH

- Always use a condom when you have sex, even between outbreaks.
- While herpes is often spread without symptoms, it is especially important to avoid sexual contact during and around outbreaks.
- Talk to your healthcare provider about options to reduce your risk of spreading it.

Talk to your doctor or healthcare provider

If you have herpes, there are also treatments that your doctor can recommend to reduce the number of outbreaks you get.