

Herpes

Herpes is an outbreak of painful sores on the mouth or sex organs. It is caused by a common virus called herpes simplex (HSV). About 80% of people with HIV also have herpes. Open herpes sores make it easier to transmit HIV. When a person has herpes sores for four or more weeks it is a sign of AIDS.

Once a person has herpes, the virus never goes away. It is only active for short lengths of time when outbreaks happen. A person may not know they have the virus and pass it on. Stress, a cold, an infection or a strong ultra-violet light can cause the virus to become active.

People with both HIV and HSV get herpes breakouts more often. The breakouts last longer and are more severe. People with both HIV and HSV need to be very careful when their herpes flares up. Their viral load goes up at this time. This makes it easier to spread HIV to others.

Symptoms

Sores on the mouth and sores on the sex organs are caused by two types of the herpes virus.

HSV-1 causes cold sores on the mouth. These are spots on the edge of the lip, nostrils, gums and/or roof of the mouth that tingle or are painful.

HSV-2 causes genital herpes. It affects the sex organs, anus, thighs and/or buttocks.

Symptoms include:

- Spots that are numb, itch or tingle
- Groups of small blisters. These red, painful sores show up 4-7 days after you are exposed or the virus becomes active. They burst and scab before they heal. With a healthy immune system, they take about a week to go away.

- Fever, headache, muscle aches, and swollen lymph glands in the groin occur when a person is first infected.
- Pain when you pee (sometimes)
- Some women have a fluid discharge from the vagina.

The signs vary from person to person. An outbreak can be mild or severe. It can happen once a year or every few weeks.

Before an outbreak, there may be sharp pains in the pelvis or down the leg. The first outbreak tends to be the most severe. After that, they are less painful and go away faster.

Herpes may affect the throat, colon, liver, eyes or lungs. Herpes encephalitis is when the virus goes into the brain. This causes headache, upset stomach, mental changes, seizures or clumsy movement. It can be fatal, but is rare in people with HIV.

Causes of and Risk Factors

The virus spreads when the sores touch moist, soft skin. This can happen when you kiss or have sex. Sores do not have to be open for herpes to spread. It also spreads by:

- Direct contact with the sores
- If you share a glass, cigarette, lipstick, etc.
- The infected skin falls off

How to Know You Have Herpes

There are tests to check for herpes. They may use a swab of a sore to grow the virus, give you a fluorescent screen test or a blood test.

Treatment

Salt baths can help relieve the pain of herpes but do not treat the disease.

Herpes is harder to control if a person also has HIV. Higher doses of HIV meds may be needed.

Prescribed drugs may be taken to prevent future outbreaks of herpes. The virus may build a resistance to these drugs over time.

Pregnant women with genital herpes need special care. Herpes can kill babies. Pregnant women with active genital herpes will have a cesarean (C-section) birth.

Herpes can make you feel alone. Local support groups where you live can help.

Prevention

It is hard to prevent the spread of herpes. Many people with herpes do not know they have the virus. Others may not know it can spread even if the sores are not open.

Condoms cannot prevent herpes but they can make it harder to spread. If people with herpes follow their HIV treatment, it will reduce the chance they will spread the virus to others.

For more information

Contact your Registered Nurse Care Manager, or call Positive Healthcare's Nurse Advice Line at: (800) 797-1717.

