

Infection Prevention and You



Genital herpes and other sexually transmitted diseases

April is STD Awareness Month

Genital herpes, caused by the herpes simplex type 1 and type 2 viruses, is a very common sexually transmitted disease (STD). Any person who is sexually active is at risk for getting herpes. In fact, most people with the virus don't have any symptoms; however, even without symptoms, the disease can still be spread between sexual partners.

According to the CDC, about one in every six people between the ages of 14 and 49 in the United States has genital herpes. Herpes is spread when someone has vaginal, anal, or oral sex with another person who has the disease. Generally, contact with the fluid in the sores can cause the infection. However, you can still get herpes from someone who is infected, even if they don't have a visible sore. This is because the virus can be released through their skin.

Symptoms

Symptoms of herpes can be nonexistent or very mild. Sometimes this means that symptoms are mistaken for something else. Because of this, many people do not know they have herpes. When symptoms do occur, they usually show as sores that look like blisters on or around the genitals, rectum, or mouth. After the blisters break, they leave painful sores that can take weeks to heal.

A person with herpes can have genital ulcers and develop lesions in other areas such as buttocks, groin, fingers, or eye. Herpes can also cause some rare but serious complications including blindness, encephalitis (inflammation of the brain), and aseptic meningitis (inflammation of the brain linings).

Prevention

Avoiding vaginal, anal, or oral sex or being in an exclusive monogamous relationship with someone who has tested negative are the only ways to truly prevent getting herpes. Use of condoms with every sexual encounter can help protect you, but the virus can be present in areas of contact that are not covered by condoms.

Treatment

There is no cure for herpes. Antiviral medications can help treat the symptoms and prevent or shorten outbreaks. Research is being done on a vaccine but currently, nothing is available.

Be aware of other STDs

In addition to herpes, there are a number of other common STDs and a few of them are rising in numbers. Chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, human papillomavirus, and pelvic inflammatory disease are some of the more common STDs along with herpes. The CDC estimates that in the United States, nearly 20 million new STDs occur every year and about half occur in people ages 15-24. The rate of syphilis increased 10 percent between 2012 and 2013 in men—particularly gay and bisexual men.

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Basic prevention for all STDs

1. Get the facts.
2. Take control (abstinence, vaccines [if applicable], condoms, mutual monogamy, reduced number of sex partners).
3. Get tested.

Additional Resources

CDC Genital Herpes Fact Sheet <http://www.cdc.gov/std/herpes/stdfact-herpes.htm>

CDC Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) <http://www.cdc.gov/std>

CDC April is STD Awareness Month <http://www.cdc.gov/std/sam/>

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