

## Further information

Further information about STIs is available on the Soa Aids Nederland (STI AIDS Netherlands) website [www.soa aids.nl](http://www.soa aids.nl). Soa Aids Nederland is a centre of expertise for HIV infection and other STIs. Young people can visit the Dutch information site [www.sense.info](http://www.sense.info). Other Dutch sites with reliable information on herpes are [www.huidarts.info](http://www.huidarts.info) (with details on different kinds of herpes) and [www.nhg.artsennet.nl](http://www.nhg.artsennet.nl) (with leaflets that doctors give their patients).

# Genital herpes

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## For answers to your questions on STIs, call the AIDS STI Infoline

0900-204 204 0 (10 cents per minute)  
Mon - Fri 10 a.m. - 8 p.m.  
Thurs and Fri 2 - 8 p.m.  
or send an e-mail to: [infolijn@soa aids.nl](mailto:infolijn@soa aids.nl)

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**SOAIDS**

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by a virus. The infected skin and mucous membrane (lining) in and around the genitals become painful. Genital herpes is passed on during sexual contact with someone who is infected. The virus can enter the body through the skin or the mucous membrane of the mouth, penis, vagina or anus. You can also transfer the virus with your fingers to another part of the body, such as the eyes, or to a partner. Touching blisters or sores in the infected area of skin or mucous membrane is best avoided, and hands should be washed thoroughly after any contact.

Herpes cannot be cured, but the symptoms can be treated.

## Symptoms

The first signs and symptoms start about a week after infection with the virus. These are often itching, irritation, burning or stinging. Red marks will appear on the skin or mucous membranes. One to two days later, there will be small blisters or sores. They are usually on or around the penis, the opening to the vagina, or the area around the vagina or anus, but they might be inside the vagina, on the cervix or in the anus (where they are not visible).

Some people will have very painful symptoms while others get the virus quite mildly. During the first outbreak, there may also be aches and pains, fever, swollen glands in the groin and vaginal discharge. Women tend to have trouble passing urine. After anal sex with someone who has herpes, the rectum may become infected. This may cause pain, blood or mucus in the stools (faeces).

After about three weeks, the blisters and sores will dry out and heal, usually leaving no scars.

## Recurrent outbreaks

Once the symptoms of the first infection have disappeared, it will seem as if the herpes virus has gone from the person's body too. Unfortunately that is not the case. The virus has withdrawn from the skin or mucous membranes into a group of nerve cells. It stays dormant there, but can become active again and cause new blisters on the skin or mucous membranes.

It's hard to say how often an outbreak will recur. Some people have one every month, while others have them only occasionally or just the once. Recurrent outbreaks of genital herpes are usually milder than the first one.

It is not known why some people have more recurrent outbreaks than others. A generally good state of health does seem to make a difference. Most outbreaks occur in situations where someone's immune system is weakened or their resistance is low, such as during a woman's period or after an attack of flu. Stress also increases the risk of an outbreak.

## Herpes and HIV

If your immune system has been severely weakened, by HIV for example, then an outbreak of genital herpes could be prolonged and much more serious. There is also a greater risk of recurrent outbreaks. In cases like these, there will be a longer and more intensive treatment for the genital herpes. During an outbreak of herpes, someone has a higher risk of becoming infected with HIV. And a person with HIV will be more infectious during a herpes outbreak. Safe sex or no sex at all during outbreaks of herpes is particularly important for people infected with HIV. They should also discuss their herpes infection with the doctor treating them for HIV/AIDS.

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## Pregnancy

If a woman has had herpes, this will have no effect on her pregnancy. She should tell her doctor, midwife or gynaecologist. As there is only a slight risk of a child becoming infected with the virus during childbirth, there is no reason for anything other than a normal birth. Sometimes the baby is tested for the herpes virus after the birth, just to make sure.

If a woman has become infected with herpes in the final month of pregnancy, there may be a risk for the child. A caesarean delivery will then be considered.

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## Diagnosis

The virus is often diagnosed on the basis of its specific blisters and symptoms. If necessary, some fluid from the blisters or a swab from underneath the blisters is taken and tested.

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## Treatment

There are no drugs that can get rid of the herpes virus. It stays in your body and may reappear. A healthy body and mind do help to reduce the frequency of the outbreaks.

Tablets are available that shorten the outbreaks. These stop the virus multiplying in the body, preventing it spreading any further. They also reduce the number of symptoms and the pain this causes. It is important to start taking the tablets soon after the outbreak begins. Sometimes people are prescribed painkillers too. For herpes on the lips (cold sores) creams are available at chemists and pharmacies. Unfortunately these creams do not relieve genital herpes.

People whose symptoms recur often (six times a year or more) should consult their doctor. It may then be worth considering long-term treatment with tablets to prevent the outbreaks occurring.



## Preventing infection

During an outbreak of genital herpes it is better to have no penetrative sex at all. But if this can't be avoided, it is important to use a condom.

If someone has a cold sore, it is better for him or her to have no oral sex (licking or sucking). They should also avoid touching any blisters, sores or scabs, because it's easy to transfer the virus with your fingers to your own or the other person's genitals.

Remember this: someone can be infected with herpes without having any symptoms themselves. So there may be no blisters or red marks, but even without symptoms you can infect someone else. People might pass the virus on without realising it because the blisters are not visible when they're on the cervix or in the anus. And as a condom will never completely cover the genitals, infection is also possible if the blisters are just outside the edge of the condom.



## Living with herpes

Genital herpes is an STI that often makes people feel guilty. What makes things worse is that the outbreaks recur and the herpes virus remains in your body. Realising that only the first attack of herpes was caused by sexual contact can help. Each recurrent outbreak is happening in the body itself; it is the virus becoming active. But even though these outbreaks are usually milder, herpes remains an unpleasant disorder that cannot be cured.



## Warning partners

Partners do not need to be examined or treated. They only need to see their doctor if they themselves have symptoms. It is advisable to discuss herpes with your regular partner. The virus can recur without there being a new sexual partner or any casual sex.