



Herpes Simplex

What is herpes simplex?

Herpes simplex is an infection caused by herpes simplex virus (HSV) types 1 and 2. Both HSV-1 and HSV-2 can cause genital herpes infections, but HSV-1 more commonly causes infections of the mouth and lips (blister-like sores in the mouth and around the lips and on tissues that are in contact with the mouth, such as a sucked thumb or finger).

Who is at risk for herpes simplex?

Males and females of all ages are at risk.

What are the symptoms of herpes simplex?

Many people have mild or no symptoms. Symptoms may include fever; irritability; headache; tender, swollen lymph nodes; and small, painful fluid-filled blisters in the mouth, on the gums or lips, or on sex organs or the anus. Blisters progress to open sores that crust over and heal within two to four weeks.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms generally appear between two days and two weeks.

How is herpes simplex spread?

HSV-1 is primarily spread by direct contact through kissing and contact with open sores or by contact with saliva (i.e., from mouthed toys). HSV-2 is usually spread through sexual contact. Both types 1 and 2 may be spread by vaginal, oral or anal sex; contact with an infected person's sores; or from an infected mother to her newborn. Most herpes simplex infections are spread from an infected person who does not have a visible sore.

When and for how long is a person able to spread the disease?

During the first infection, people shed the virus and can spread the disease for at least a week and occasionally for several weeks after signs or symptoms appear. After that first infection, the virus may be shed off and on for years and possibly lifelong. People with repeated infections shed the virus for up to five days after signs or symptoms appear. Infected individuals who have no signs or symptoms may shed lower levels of virus.

How is a person diagnosed?

A health-care provider can diagnose herpes simplex by visual inspection or by taking a sample from the sore(s) and testing it in a laboratory. Blood tests may be used, but the results are not always clear-cut.

What is the treatment?

There is no treatment that can cure herpes simplex; infection is lifelong. Antiviral medications can shorten and prevent repeated infections during the period of time the person takes the medication.

Does past infection make a person immune?

The infection is lifelong and can reappear at various times in a person's life.

Should children or others be excluded from day care, school, work or other activities if they have herpes simplex?

Oral herpes simplex infections are common among children who are in child care or school. Most of these infections do not result in symptoms. Only children with a first infection and symptoms and who do not have control of oral secretions should be excluded from child care. Children with cold sores and recurrent infection do not have to be excluded from child care or school. Children with uncovered sores on exposed surfaces pose a small risk to contacts. If children are certified by a physician to have recurrent infection, covering the sores when they attend child care or school is sufficient.

What can be done to prevent the spread of herpes simplex?

To prevent the spread of herpes simplex, exercise careful and frequent hand washing, avoid kissing or nuzzling children when a cold sore is present, do not share food or drinks with children or staff, do not touch sores, and avoid the sharing of respiratory secretions through contact with objects.

Additional Information:

Additional information is available at www.ndhealth.gov/disease/ or by calling the North Dakota Department of Health at 800.472.2180.

Resource: American Academy of Pediatrics. [Section 3, Summaries of Infectious Diseases]. In: Pickering LK, ed. *Red Book: 2003 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. 26th ed. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2003:[page 344]

