



## **Herpes Simplex Virus**

The herpes simplex virus (HSV) can cause a blister(s) anywhere on the skin. It most commonly occurs around the mouth, or on the lips, nose, genitals, and buttocks. There are two types of HSV: generally, type 1 occurs above the waist (fever blisters, cold sores), type 2 below the waist. Type 1 is usually acquired in childhood. Type 2 occurs when adults are exposed while having sex with an infected person. The incubation period (time from infection to blisters) is anywhere from three to 20 days. The disease is very common and affects millions of people in the USA. Type 2 infections occur in up to 20 percent of sexually active adults.

HSV blisters can be recurrent and return periodically. Only about 10% of infected people have symptoms during the primary phase. If symptoms develop during the first episode, they are often more severe than in later eruptions. Primary symptoms last longer (two or three weeks) and are often accompanied by a fever, discomfort, and swollen lymph glands. Many patients do not know when they are originally acquired the infection.

The disease may remain latent (inactive) for weeks, months or years before blisters return. During these periods, the virus hibernates in nerve tissue. When it becomes active, it travels through the nerves, producing blisters on the skin supplied by these nerves. The recurrences are unpredictable. Some things that may trigger recurrences are exposure to sunlight, colds or other viral infections, stress, skin irritation, and menstrual periods.

**DIAGNOSIS:** Often the physician can diagnose this disease simply by looking at the blisters. If there are questions, your dermatologist may do a skin scraping and examine it under a microscope. He or she may also perform a viral culture.

**PRECAUTIONS:** If you have blisters, or if you feel a blister starting (tingling, burning, or minor pain in the area), **do not let that area come in contact with another person.** Avoid kissing, sexual intercourse. Do not share eating utensils, washcloths, underwear, or swimsuits. You are most contagious during the **first three days** of symptoms.

**SERIOUS COMPLICATIONS OF HSV:** The virus can affect the eye. Avoid rubbing or touching your eyes if you have a active blister. Eye infection can cause pain, redness, sensitivity to light, and a discharge or fluid from the eye. If this occurs, you should see an ophthalmologist (eye doctor). Early treatment will prevent scarring of the cornea of the eye or other complications.

A pregnant woman who has active type 2 HSV blisters when her baby is born can pass the virus on to the baby. This can cause a brain infection in the baby and can result in serious damage or mental retardation. Be sure to tell your OB doctor if you have had problems with recurrent symptoms, if you suspect you have contacted HSV, or if your sexual partner has an HSV infection.

### **TREATMENT:**

- Avoid any of the things that may cause an eruption. Use sunscreens for skin and for lips.
- Changes in diet have not been proven to help.
- Acyclovir (Zovirax) is a drug which is effective in treating HSV infections. The drug is usually safe and has very few side effects. The most common side effects are stomach upset and headache. It may be taken with food, but should not be taken with antacids. Acyclovir does not cure HSV, but it does decrease symptoms and shorten the duration of the episodes.

**WHO IS TO BLAME:** When one partner in a sexual relationship develops genital herpes, the normal reaction is to blame the other partner. Because this infection can begin with no symptoms or only slight symptoms, and because it can remain inactive for years, there is no way to tell where, when, or from whom the infection was acquired. If you have a known HSV infection, it is recommended you discuss this with all sexual partners, abstain from sex when there are active lesions, and always practice safe sex.