Genital Herpes Encyclopedia Article

Genital Herpes

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Genital Herpes

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) usually caused by herpes simplex virus (HSV) type 2.

Herpes is a family of viruses that causes various types of infections, one of which is genital herpes. In the United States, one-half million new cases of genital herpes are reported every year. Oral herpes, which causes **cold sores** of the mouth or lips, is caused by a different type of herpes virus (HSV type 1) and is not sexually transmitted.

Symptoms

Many people with herpes have no symptoms and do not know they are infected. A genital herpes infection in the active state is characterized by genital lesions (sores or blisters), discharge, pain, and itching; painful urination; swollen glands in the groin; fever; and fatigue. After this symptomatic episode, the virus becomes dormant, sometimes for years, until some type of stress precipitates another attack.

Transmission

Genital herpes can be spread only when it is in the active state. HSV type 2 is usually transmitted through sexual contact, although the virus can live for a time on objects such as towels and toilet seats. Strict personal hygiene during an active episode can prevent spread of the virus. There should be no sexual activity until all sores are completely healed (one to four weeks), and a person infected with genital herpes should always use a condom and spermicides.

Treatment

There is no cure for genital herpes. A medication called acyclovir may be prescribed to accelerate healing during an initial attack. Warm baths, ointments, and pain medication can help alleviate symptoms during an attack, but the virus itself does not disappear when symptoms subside.

See Also

Cold Sores; Herpes Simplex

For Further Study

Books

Daugirdas, John T., M.D. *STD, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, Including HIV/AIDS.* Hinsdale, IL: Medtext, 1992.

Organizations

National Sexually Transmitted Disease Hotline
Telephone: (800) 227-8922
(Free information and clinic referrals)