

A PROBLEM OF ADJUSTMENT

To answer the first of these questions, it's useful to remember that genital herpes affects everyone differently. For some, it's a minor matter. For others, it can cause a number of concerns, including problems with self-esteem or feelings of isolation. Sexually, it can affect one's sense of spontaneity or freedom, for example. Some people may feel apprehension about approaching a member of the opposite sex or may experience a decrease in sexual pleasure around the time of diagnosis—feelings that often center on the fear of spreading genital herpes to a partner. These concerns may be heightened if the person is experiencing frequent outbreaks.

As with other aspects of genital herpes, however, such concerns tend to be especially pressing in the first few months after being diagnosed. Later, in many people, these feelings tend to fade. Over time, people find that they can enjoy sex, function well, and have as active a sex life as they had before being diagnosed.

PROTECTING YOUR PARTNER

To talk about the diminishing impact of genital herpes over the long term is not to trivialize it. You have a lifelong infection and can spread genital herpes to a partner. Having genital herpes will likely bring some changes to your sex life. The most important of these is probably the issue of risk reduction—helping to protect your sexual partners. When interviewed, people almost universally report being very concerned about transmitting genital herpes to a partner. They want to know how likely this is to occur and what they can do to reduce the risk.

Decisions about risk reduction are best made as a couple. In the first place, in some relationships genital herpes won't be much of a concern. You may have a partner who knows there is a chance of becoming infected but simply is not worried about it. Or you may have a partner who already has genital herpes in a latent form but doesn't know it. As you may know, something like 70%-80% of the more than 45 million Americans with genital herpes don't know they have it. If the two of you agree that it's important to find out, you can get one of the new "type-specific" blood tests for Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV). Then, if your partner already has the same type of genital herpes you do, you should consult with your healthcare provider and you may decide that there's less need to take precautions between outbreaks.

If there is a risk of transmission, however, what you can do to prevent the spread of genital herpes comes down to two steps: (1) avoiding direct skin-to-skin contact with genital herpes lesions during outbreaks; and (2) using latex condoms between outbreaks to lower the risk of spreading genital herpes when it's active without

symptoms - periods of "asymptomatic shedding." Active disease means you may be shedding virus but you might not have any blisters. Shedding virus means virus is around your skin, and you can transmit it even when no lesions or sores are present.

Both of these issues center on times when HSV has reactivated. The period during which you're actually contagious may in fact be a relatively small percentage of the time. Because it's unpredictable, however, the precautions needed to protect a partner deserve a detailed discussion. It's important to remember that you may be contagious even if you don't have any noticeable symptoms.

DURING OUTBREAKS

The risk of spreading genital herpes is highest whenever symptoms are present. The tingling or itch of prodrome, or the period before an outbreak, for example, is a signal that the genital herpes virus has probably found its way to the surface of the skin and that there is risk of spreading HSV to a sexual partner. An itchy red patch of skin near the genitals also should be considered a likely site of viral shedding, as should a typical genital herpes blister.

When signs and symptoms of genital herpes are present, any direct genital-to-genital contact or any sexual act that involves penetration, such as vaginal or anal sex, creates a high risk of transmission. Also included as having an increased risk of transmission would be oral sex such as cunnilingus (mouth on vaginal area) and fellatio (mouth on penis), because of the direct contact between mucous membranes.

What about simply using condoms during outbreaks? Unfortunately, condoms do not offer complete protection during these periods. In terms of simple anatomy, some genital herpes lesions will be covered or protected by a condom, but some will not. A herpes lesion on the buttocks, for example, will not be covered, nor will a lesion on the upper thigh.

When can you consider an outbreak over? When is it safe again to have sex? The rule of thumb is to avoid direct contact with the affected area from the first hint of prodrome until any skin lesions are fully healed and the skin surface looks normal again. Studies have shown that asymptomatic shedding is most probable in the days immediately before or after an outbreak. Therefore, waiting for a day or two after the skin is healed gives an added measure of protection.

BETWEEN OUTBREAKS

Even if you have outbreaks, it's likely that the vast majority of your life will be symptom-free. The problem is the issue of asymptomatic viral shedding—days when genital herpes may become active with-

out causing noticeable symptoms. Studies have shown that most transmissions occur during asymptomatic shedding because people are unaware that the virus is active and do not take precautions.

Experts say that the best protection is to use condoms between outbreaks. While condoms were not recommended as protection during outbreaks, they're considered acceptable protection during asymptomatic periods. How will a condom protect you? The research to date suggests that the biggest risk of transmission occurs when there's contact involving surfaces such as the penis or the soft mucosal tissue of the vagina, cervix, or anus. These are areas that are protected or covered by condoms. So researchers say that condoms provide useful protection between outbreaks.

THINKING THROUGH THE ISSUES

It's often most useful to consider the question of genital herpes risk reduction in the broader context of reproductive health. Is there a need for contraception? Are there other risks to consider—other partners for either of you? Are condoms being used already? It's important that you have a frank discussion with any partner or potential partner about genital herpes before becoming sexually intimate.

Some partners will be concerned about the acquisition of genital herpes and will want to take precautions such as regular condom use. You may well find that respecting your partner's wishes and talking through the possible approaches to risk reduction is not so difficult. You may also opt for a special blood test to determine whether you both have the same type of HSV already. You can learn more about the type-specific blood tests for HSV or about risk reduction in general by calling the National Herpes Hotline or talking to your healthcare provider.

GENITAL HERPES AND LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS

Does genital herpes stand in the way of long-term relationships? Having genital herpes can be devastating to any couple if the person who has it withholds this information from his or her partner. Understandably, if the person is kept in the dark and then contracts genital herpes, he or she can feel anger or betrayal—especially if dishonesty and deception are involved. Trust is important in any relationship, and keeping silent about something that can potentially put a partner at risk, like genital herpes, is not a good way to ensure a long-term, healthy relationship. If a potential partner decides not to pursue a long-term relationship with you after hearing that you

have genital herpes, try not to let it get you down. It just means that wasn't the right person for you.

But once honestly discussed, genital herpes is generally not a major issue for couples in a valued relationship. The American Social Health Association has interviewed a number of behavioral experts as well as dozens of couples over the years for its National Herpes Resource Center. The bottom line is this: In a relationship that is otherwise sound and healthy, genital herpes often becomes simply a matter of practicalities—a relatively minor health problem with some accompanying emotions. As one woman commented: "Believe me, if I could change one thing about my husband, genital herpes would not be it!"

OVERALL, genital herpes doesn't have to stand in the way of having a healthy and satisfying sex life. Taking precautions to protect your partner—along with issues of contraception or protecting each other from sexually transmitted diseases—is something that each couple needs to sort out based on their own circumstances.

For more information on related topics, call the National Herpes Resource Center at 877-411-HERPES, or visit them online at www.ashastd.org.

Genital Herpes and sexual health

People often worry about the effect that genital herpes is going to have on their sexuality and their intimate relationships. It's one of the concerns that can make genital herpes seem so devastating initially, and there is often anxiety over telling a partner. Starting or maintaining an intimate relationship isn't the easiest thing in the world, anyway. And putting genital herpes into the mix can seem at first to add an unwanted layer of complexity.

In this article, we'll address three issues that people may confront as they adjust to a diagnosis of genital herpes: Is genital herpes likely to have a major impact on one's sex life? What can you do to protect a sexual partner—to help prevent them from getting genital herpes? Does genital herpes have to stand in the way of long-term relationships?