

PATIENT AND PROVIDER

For most people, getting the help they need begins with their healthcare provider. The healthcare provider is often the first person we ever talk to about genital herpes, and the tone and content of that conversation often shapes how we perceive genital herpes and how we manage it. Ideally, if you already have been diagnosed with genital herpes, your healthcare provider spent enough time with you to answer your questions about the genital herpes simplex virus, its likely pattern of recurrences, and the options available for treatment. If you had questions about how you got genital herpes, perhaps these were covered during the office visits, along with questions about your risk of spreading it to others.

In many cases, however, people newly diagnosed with genital herpes report frustrations about their experiences. The diagnosis itself is tough to hear — and tough for many healthcare providers to deliver. And here again, depending on the individual, the diagnosis can raise several issues of importance to the patient. In all fairness, it's very difficult for healthcare providers to cover all of these issues in one visit. With a waiting room full of patients, there often isn't time to say or do everything they would like to. Beyond this, healthcare providers may feel that they aren't prepared to discuss some of the emotional aspects associated with genital herpes.

Whatever the specifics of your situation, it's important to try to keep the lines of communication open. Patients should have a way to get answers, to get treatment if they need it, and to get advice on something that can affect their lives. If you feel you need some more time with your healthcare provider, you might try to schedule a follow-up visit to discuss your questions.

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Whether your major concern is with the medical management of genital herpes or its emotional impact, there is a range of helpful informational resources at your disposal.

Brochures and books are available from several publishers. You can get free materials by calling the American Social Health Association (ASHA), an independent nonprofit agency that runs the National Herpes Resource Center (877-411-HERPES). In addition to free pamphlets, ASHA publishes a full-length book entitled *Managing Herpes*, from which this article is adapted. It also publishes a newsletter called *The Helper* available for an annual subscription price. ASHA materials can be ordered through the organization's Web site, www.ashastd.org. Additional books on genital herpes are available from online suppliers or local booksellers.

If you think you would benefit from being able to talk through some of your questions or concerns, you might also consider calling a telephone hotline. The National Herpes Hotline (919-361-8488), sponsored by ASHA, has trained health communications specialists available from 9 am to 7 pm (Eastern Time), Monday through Friday. It's a long-distance call, but the service includes free educational materials.

The National Herpes Hotline also provides referrals to local groups operating help lines and face-to-face support group meetings. The local groups affiliated with ASHA have medical advisors. Depending on your needs, local resources may be useful.

WEB RESEARCH

More and more people are turning to the World Wide Web for information. The Web can be a powerful tool, and a variety of sites offer up-to-date information geared to patients. Sites can be divided into a number of categories. In the public/government category, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has excellent information about a range of sexually transmitted diseases, as does the National Institutes of Health. In the private, nonprofit category, you might check out the ASHA Herpes Resource Center (www.ashastd.org) and the American Herpes Foundation (www.herpes-foundation.org). Also, the pharmaceutical companies with genital herpes products can be useful sources of information. This includes GlaxoSmithKline (www.herpeshelp.com), which has patient-focused modules.

Several of the sites mentioned above have links to other, more specialized services. As with any aspect of Internet research, a caveat is in order: Information posted on Web sites may be out of date, inaccurate or purely promotional in nature and may not be trustworthy. Some sites are designed largely to promote herpes treatments that have not been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Others are primarily dating services. If you are learning about herpes from Web sites, make sure your information is coming from a reputable site. It is best to verify your facts with a trusted source, such as your healthcare provider.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Beyond the need for medical help and solid information, genital herpes sometimes has an emotional impact that can be the most difficult consequence to cope with. Particularly if you're recently diagnosed, you may be feeling upset about genital herpes and a bit uncertain about whom you're going to talk to first and what you're going to say. You may be concerned about how to discuss the topic with sexual partners. These feelings are normal and often are very short-lived, but certainly linger in some people. If you're feeling isolated and don't know where to begin, the most important point to stress here is that being able to get support is extremely important in adjusting to having genital herpes. Often the support you need is available from a number of different people in your life. You may need a little time first, but opening up and talking about your feelings may be exactly the boost you need to put things in perspective and get on with your life.

If you find you need some help breaking the ice, you might start by calling the National Herpes Hotline (919-361-8488). This gives you a chance to say what's on your mind in an anonymous and confidential setting. The hotline can also refer you to a local support group if you're feeling the need to talk things through with someone who has had similar experiences.

If you find that coping with genital herpes has had a great emotional impact on your life, you may also consider making an appointment with a trained counselor or other mental healthcare provider. Your physician or local health association can provide you with referrals. The bottom line is this: There are millions of other people who have been diagnosed with genital herpes, and there are a great many resources you can draw on for help with virtually every question that may arise. Getting the answers you need may be as simple as picking up the phone. Talking to someone who understands, and is trained in this area, can help you sort out your feelings. It can also prepare you to discuss these topics with others who are close to you.

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

Getting the support you need

Depending on one's circumstances, genital herpes can be complicated to live with and manage. Its symptoms may be annoying or distracting. It might be disruptive to your relationships, and it might affect your state of mind or mood. In order to best handle these complications, you may need access to several different kinds of resources.