

GENITAL HERPES AND SELF-IMAGE

Many people describe genital herpes as shaking their self-confidence or some think it makes themselves less “worthy”. For example, a young woman who had acquired genital herpes as a teenager wrote: “I had times when I would feel very unattractive and feel like I was different from everyone my own age. The best way I can sum it up is that I felt ‘dirty.’”

Why does a disease like genital herpes have the power to alter our self-image? In some ways this is truly a paradox. Herpes is a common virus, and most adults already have one type of herpes, in the form of cold sores. Most of us have had other Herpes viruses as well. Examples include the herpes viruses that cause chicken pox, mononucleosis, and the childhood infection roseola.

Psychologists point out that a number of chronic health conditions can adversely affect self-image or self-esteem, and this seems to be an issue with genital herpes. The lack of a cure, the ability to spread the disease, and the prospect of recurrent symptoms are stressful thoughts for some as they think through what having a sexually transmitted disease (STD) like genital herpes will mean for their lives.

Too often we see health as an all-or-nothing proposition — we are either healthy or unhealthy, with no middle ground. And some people regard a chronic infection like genital herpes as the end of health. We become somehow “imperfect.”

In reality, however, health involves a process of growth and change. Everyone faces a host of physical challenges as inevitable as life itself. The task is to meet them head-on and learn how to manage them. Herpes viruses are no exception.

Genital herpes can also threaten our self-image in an area where many of us feel a bit vulnerable already: our feelings of sexual desirability. People often carry around with them a good deal of general anxiety about their attractiveness to a potential partner. Feelings of insecurity such as these are commonplace, and genital herpes adds a complication.

The impact of genital herpes on one’s sex life might be challenging, but this too can be addressed — first, by learning to talk about it, and second, by making rational decisions about protecting a partner. Studies show that, with time, newly diagnosed persons can often overcome the distress they often feel about the effect having genital herpes has on sexual relationships.

SOCIAL STIGMA?

Closely connected to the issue of self-image is the matter of how we believe others will see us. In many cases, the person with genital herpes will assume that society regards him or her as different in some substantial way because of a diagnosis of genital herpes. This,

in essence, is the definition of “social stigma.” It’s the feeling that genital herpes is thought of as more than a medical condition.

A joke you remember from years ago, a less-than-sensitive remark by a doctor — these sorts of experiences can cast a long shadow psychologically. On the other hand, talking to an understanding friend about genital herpes may show you an entirely different reality. Lots of people know that genital herpes is a very common infection, and lots of people know someone who has genital herpes.

So why don’t they talk about it more? One reason that genital herpes raises issues of social stigma is that, as a society, we’re just beginning to feel more comfortable talking about sex and sexuality in general. Today, we’re surrounded by the imagery of sex in the arts and in the entertainment industry and in the marketing of products as diverse as soft drinks and automobiles. There are some signs as well that on a personal level we are becoming somewhat more open about sexuality — more likely to discuss topics such as sexual orientation and sexual dysfunction. All the same, these topics still are not the easiest things for many of us to bring up in conversation.

With genital herpes, there is a similar trend to more heightened awareness and openness. The public is much better educated about STDs today than ever before, and perhaps the day will come when even the idea of social stigma connected to genital herpes becomes a distant memory.

TALKING ABOUT GENITAL HERPES

In the meantime, of course, it may be a bit awkward or embarrassing to discuss genital herpes with various people in your life, and many people worry for a while about the practical impact of genital herpes on important relationships. Do you dare tell people? Will discussing genital herpes damage a relationship you have now? Will a future romantic interest understand and accept the news?

These anxieties are natural, but it’s important to take steps to help overcome them. If you are withdrawing from friends or intimate relationships because of what you’ve internalized as “social stigma,” you run the risk of cutting yourself off from the support you need to keep everything in perspective. Social support is an important factor in ensuring that genital herpes doesn’t substantially interfere with your life over the long haul.

The key to keeping genital herpes in perspective is getting information and keeping open the lines of communication. People who can tell a partner or a friend about genital herpes often get emotional support from this person when they need it.

Talking about genital herpes, even with someone you love and trust, can be daunting at first. And genital herpes isn’t likely to be something that you will choose to bring up with just anyone. People most frequently report discussing genital herpes with their healthcare provider and with their spouse or partner.

Perhaps the most pressing worry for those newly diagnosed with genital herpes is the reaction of a sexual partner. Feelings of suspicion or resentment can be a factor in some cases, as a couple tries to sort out the source of the genital herpes infection. Perhaps most often, people say they fear telling a new partner or romantic interest because they’re afraid of being rejected. They particularly worry about genital herpes being transmitted, and about how the conversation is going to go when they have to talk about which precautions they might have to take. Experts say the best way to approach this is to think through what you are going to say — perhaps even rehearse it — and then say it in a direct, honest, and upbeat way. (Telling a partner and thinking through the issue of transmission are explored in depth in two other articles available in this series.)

Support can come from a friend as well. If the emotional issues are especially troubling to you, you may find it helpful to speak to a trained counselor. Contact your local mental health association or talk to your healthcare provider. He or she may be able to refer you to a counselor or recommend other ways to help you better cope with the emotional impact of genital herpes on your life. In any case, the key is having someone to talk to, but this requires honesty and openness on the part of the person with genital herpes. Acceptance and support may be just around the corner, but it requires you to take those first steps.

GENITAL HERPES AND SEXUAL HEALTH

As we mentioned earlier, sexuality appears to be an area where many people experience insecurity from time to time, and having a chronic infection that can be sexually transmitted can exacerbate these insecurities. In addition, there are practical issues. Having an infection that can reactivate at unpredictable times does present some challenges. Genital herpes can interfere with sex because sexual contact should be avoided when symptoms are present. The fact that you can transmit the disease to another person even when you don’t have symptoms is also a concern, and raises the issue of condom use between outbreaks.

As with other aspects of the emotional and social adjustment to having genital herpes, surveys show that some people find genital herpes affects their enjoyment of sex and their spontaneity. But here again, the negative effects can be short-term. After a period of adjustment, many people have sex just as often and enjoy it just as much as they did before, even when adhering to the appropriate precautions.

Most people with genital herpes naturally do worry about transmitting herpes to a sexual partner, and having a sexual relationship does mean considering the risks: When is genital herpes active? What, precisely, are your symptoms? Is my partner at risk — or do they already have it? Do we need to use condoms?

There are things you can do to lower the risk of spreading genital herpes. Experts believe that simply knowing your symptoms and refraining from sexual contact during symptomatic times is an important precaution. But you need to be aware that you can still spread the virus even when you don’t have symptoms. In fact, genital herpes is most often spread from someone who does not have symptoms. The use of latex condoms between outbreaks has value in lowering the risk of transmission.

MOVING FORWARD

If having genital herpes is causing you a lot of emotional stress, here are some points to keep in mind:

- Realize that it’s normal to be stressed emotionally by genital herpes, especially at first. Give yourself some time to adjust, and remember that the emotional issues should get easier. Get the support you need, whether that means talking to a counselor or a trusted friend.
- Keep in mind that genital herpes is a medical condition, not a judgement. See your healthcare provider. You are capable of managing it.
- If you’re feeling isolated, you may need to find someone to talk to. Perhaps you might pick one close understanding friend and tell her or him about it. You can ask that the conversation be kept in absolute confidence. Or you may want to seek the help of a counselor or support group. Your healthcare provider can help you find these resources.
- Try not to make the assumption that having genital herpes will prevent you from being romantically involved or having successful long-term relationships. There are millions of couples in which one or both partners have this infection. For the vast majority, the relationships stand or fall on far more important issues. Get the help you need to learn how to talk about genital herpes with a partner. Remember, good relationships depend on the ability to communicate openly.

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

References:

1. Brookes JL. Haywood S. Green J. Adjustment to the psychological and social sequelae of recurrent genital herpes simplex infection. *Genitourin Med.* 1993;69(5):384-387.
2. Carney O. Ross E. Bunker C. Ikkos G. Mindel A. A prospective study of the psychological impact on patients with a first episode of genital herpes. *Genitourin Med.* 1994;70(1):40-45.

Sorting out the emotional issues

When we're first diagnosed with genital herpes, much of what we learn through our healthcare providers and through brochures or Web sites has to do with the physical impact of genital herpes: the types of symptoms, the pattern of outbreaks, or factors that may trigger outbreaks.

But it's well accepted that for many people genital herpes has emotional consequences. There are literally dozens of behavioral studies that have assessed the effects of genital herpes after diagnosis both psychological and social; especially in the first few weeks and months, and even longer for some people. Genital herpes can have negative effects on self-image; it can make one feel isolated or embarrassed; it can complicate relationships. For some of us, these issues can be just as troublesome — and sometimes much more so — than its physical symptoms.

The good news is that, for most people, these problems tend to fade away with time. In fact, some studies show that even six months can make a big difference in adjusting to genital herpes for many people.^{1,2}

Your own response to genital herpes will likely depend on your personality and the circumstances of your life. For some, the emotional impact of genital herpes may be minimal, when first diagnosed. If, however, there are some tough personal issues raised by a diagnosis of genital herpes whether recent or not so recent, it can be very helpful to sort them out, analyze what's upsetting you, and think through some approaches to resolving them.