

MAKING THE CHOICE

When some people think about having a discussion like this with a partner or romantic interest, they begin to wonder if it's really necessary. Why risk rejection, they reason, when there may be another way? What about just avoiding sex during genital herpes outbreaks and practicing safer sex in between those outbreaks?

Being honest about genital herpes can be intimidating, and certainly there are individuals who choose not to tell a sex partner about genital herpes or who find it impossible to tell them until after they've had sex. There are countless combinations of people and circumstances, and no article such as this can presume to anticipate them all. But if you plan to become intimate with someone, the responsible thing to do is tell him or her that you have genital herpes. Genital herpes shouldn't be a secret locked away from your partner.

For one thing, the secrecy itself is likely to cause more anxiety than telling the truth. The closer the two of you become, the more you'll want to be honest—yet the task at hand is likely to get harder over time. If and when you do finally disclose the truth, suddenly there are many issues on the table. One is genital herpes. But potentially more explosive are the issues of honesty and trust.

It's clear that keeping genital herpes a secret from your partner can fuel emotional stress, but there are health-related issues at stake as well. Just as your partner may be at risk for genital herpes, and needs to be aware of that, he or she may also place you at risk for a number of other STDs. So it makes sense to talk about genital herpes in the context of overall sexual health. This approach equalizes people from the beginning and can help to preserve self-esteem on both sides. And, especially in these times, this type of conversation is not only acceptable, it's oftentimes expected from people who are about to become intimate.

STARTING WITH YOURSELF

Once you've decided to tell a partner about your genital herpes, it may prove helpful to think through the process and anticipate some of the potential issues.

First, it's important to consider whether you've come to terms with the disease yourself and have accepted that your life doesn't have to come to a complete stop once you learn ways to manage your condition. There's little to gain from opening up to others about genital herpes if you're likely to characterize it in the most negative way or if you are still punishing yourself over it in some way.

Self-image is a relevant concern here. If having genital herpes has radically altered the way you see yourself, it may be the best first step to consider why genital herpes is affecting you and then try to address the root of the problem. Perhaps a trusted friend or counselor could help you think through these issues.

Whether or not you find your self-esteem affected by genital herpes, it's a good idea to know the key facts about genital herpes and feel comfortable in discussing them. Be prepared for a range of questions—some of them thought-provoking and some of them quite simple. You may know a great deal by now, but you have to assume that your audience is starting from scratch.

PREPARING TO TELL: WHEN AND HOW

Each person will have a style and presentation that's unique, and no one should feel constrained to use a schedule or a script that just doesn't fit the situation. However you proceed, though, your attitude and your mood will have a great deal of influence on how the news is received. People tend to behave the way you expect them to behave, and a gloomy presentation may well increase the chance of a gloomy response. So the key is: Be positive and be confident. Expect that your partner will be accepting and supportive. You are doing the right thing for both of you.

What's the best time? It's usually best to allow a relationship to develop a bit before bringing up the subject. A conversation about sexual health is going to be easier if you have begun to feel comfortable with someone and safe about being honest.

If you do become interested in someone and begin to feel comfortable in the relationship, you can prepare yourself and look for logical opportunities to broach the subject. A television or newspaper report on sexual health—pregnancy issues or AIDS, for instance—might naturally start a conversation about safer sex.

Your conversation should occur, however, before you become physically intimate. A passionate embrace is definitely not the perfect opportunity it might seem to be. In the heat of a sexually charged moment, discussion of genital herpes or other STDs can be particularly awkward and frustrating. Your partner may be angry with you for putting him or her in that position, and this may color the entire conversation. It's probably best to broach the subject before you embark on a romantic getaway.

Many people choose to plan carefully a time and place for the conversation. And the consensus is that talking to a partner about matters of sexual history works best when both individuals are feeling good, are relaxed, and can devote their full attention to the conversation. The place should be private. It could be your own home or a quiet outdoor setting—anywhere that's relatively free of interruptions.

WHAT TO SAY

If you're worried about how to handle the situation, you may want to write down what amounts to a script and practice it. Knowing what to say and actually speaking the words in advance can make things easier when the time comes.

Clearly, people take countless approaches, but a number of common elements are often cited:

- Begin the conversation by pointing to the strengths of the relationship. For example: "I really feel I can trust you, and I'd like to tell you something very personal. Last year I found out I had contracted genital herpes." Or: "I really enjoy being with you, and I'm starting to feel very safe with you. I want to be more intimate in the future, so I think it's time we talk about safer sex."
- In describing genital herpes, keep things in perspective. Stress that it's a common viral infection and that there's medication available to treat it. Let the person know that, even while on treatment, it may be possible to spread genital herpes. Then discuss the precautions that should be taken to help prevent transmission. Many people like to make the comparison with cold sores. For example: "Have you ever had a cold sore or a fever blister? The reason I ask is that cold sores are caused by a type of herpes simplex virus. I have this virus, only for me instead of causing a sore on the lips, it can cause one below the waist."

Whatever the script, it's crucial to avoid being overly dramatic. Remember: your delivery affects your message. Try to be calm and confident, straightforward and sincere. Frame the conversation the way you've decided to and avoid language that's inherently negative. Lastly, don't lose sight of the fact that you want a dialogue, so it's best not to go on at great length. You want a discussion, not a lecture or confession.

Some may simply need time to process what you've said. Other times the first response may be an attempt to sort out the information, and some people will want to read something on genital herpes, such as a brochure or book. Remember: You may have known very little about genital herpes before you were diagnosed. In any case, you have everything to gain from helping to provide information. You can also give a partner the telephone number of the National Genital Herpes Hotline (919-361-8488).

Also, remain open to the possibility that the person you're talking to may also have genital herpes. Roughly four out of five people who are infected with HSV-2 have genital herpes, but some may not know it because the symptoms can be subtle. This may not be something you would bring up initially, and if you do, you would want to handle this in a sensitive way and make sure that the person knew you weren't accusing them of withholding information

from you. On the other hand, if the relationship progresses, getting a type-specific blood test for genital herpes can establish whether you and your potential partner already have the same type of HSV. If so, you may decide that there's less need to take precautions between outbreaks. Talk to your healthcare provider about this.

Clearly, if there are countless approaches, there are an equal number of subtleties in the responses you might get. Some people may overreact, some won't bat an eye. Given the number of people who have genital herpes, many will have had this discussion before. Whatever the reaction, try to be flexible. Remember that it took you time to adjust as well and that the first response is not always the one that counts.

Hopefully, your partner will react well. After all, you trust him or her enough to share a confidence that you probably wouldn't share with just anybody. Most people respect that. And in talking about safer sex, you've shown maturity in facing up to a health issue of mutual importance for any two people. So, when you talk to someone about genital herpes and safer sex, pat yourself on the back. You have confronted a difficult issue in your life with courage and consideration. Even if the other person decides not to pursue the relationship, remember that you have done the right thing.

For more information on these and related topics, talk to your healthcare provider or call the National Genital Herpes Resource Center at 877-411-GENITAL HERPES, or visit online at www.ashstd.org.

Telling a new partner

Carl, now 38, remembers the first few conversations he had about genital herpes. “When I was first diagnosed, I was able to make phone calls to the two people I’d been intimate with and ask if either of them had any idea if they had genital herpes. I wasn’t so much angry at that point as worried and wanting to be, I guess, responsible about it. So it wasn’t that hard to make the calls. But later, when it came time to tell someone new, I lost my nerve at first. I really couldn’t stand the idea that it might make someone feel differently about me.”

The prospect of telling another person you have genital herpes can make you anxious, especially when you’re getting ready to tell someone with whom you’d like to be sexually intimate. What will this person say? Laugh? Cry? Accept that genital herpes doesn’t have to end the relationship? Ask if there are ways to take precautions?

Whether you’re newly diagnosed or have had genital herpes for years, it’s an important conversation — one that can break the ice and set the relationship on the right course. Its outcome is not completely in your control. But there are things you can do to help shape the message and the response.