

# Herpes:

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# A Patient's Guide

# Herpes: A Patient's Guide

## Introduction

Herpes is a very common infection that is passed through skin-to-skin contact. Canadian studies have estimated that up to 89% of Canadians have been exposed to herpes simplex type 1 (HSV-1), which usually shows up as cold sores on the mouth. In a British Columbia study, about 15% of people tested positive for herpes simplex type 2 (HSV-2), which is the type of herpes most commonly thought of as genital herpes. Recently, HSV-1 has been showing up more and more on the genitals. Some people can have both types of herpes. Most people have such minor symptoms that they don't even know they have herpes.

While herpes is very common, it also carries a lot of stigma. This stigma can lead to anxiety, fear and misinformation about herpes.

This resource is meant to give you the facts about herpes, teach you tools to manage symptoms, lower the chances of passing herpes to a partner, and help you work through the emotional impact that some people feel when they find out they have herpes.

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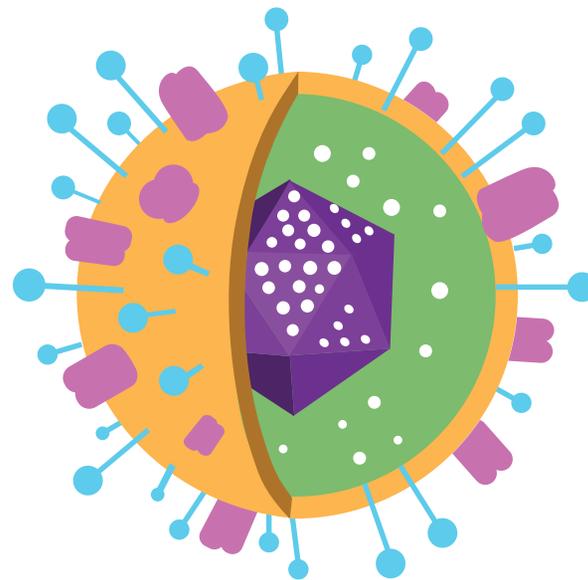
# HSV-1 and HSV-2: what's in a name?

Herpes is a common viral infection that is often found on the mouth or genitals. The herpes virus has two types: **herpes simplex 1** (HSV-1) and **herpes simplex 2** (HSV-2).

People often think of HSV-1 as oral herpes (cold sores) and HSV-2 as genital herpes. In fact, either type can be on either part of the body. While it's true that cold sores on the mouth are more likely to be caused by HSV-1, they can also be caused by HSV-2. And up to 45% of new genital herpes diagnoses are now HSV-1, not HSV-2.

Herpes can sometimes occur on other parts of the body, like the eyes (*herpes keratitis*), the finger (*herpetic whitlow*) or an area of broken skin on the body, usually from contact sports (*herpes gladiatorum*). *Herpes keratitis* and *herpes gladiatorum* are generally caused by HSV-1, while *herpetic whitlow* can be caused by HSV-1 or HSV-2.

It is often thought that HSV-2 is somehow worse than HSV-1, but this is not true. In fact, both types of herpes very rarely cause any serious health problems. Most people with HSV-1 or HSV-2 either have no symptoms or symptoms so mild that they don't notice them. People who do experience symptoms get blisters, most commonly on the mouth or genitals. If you have herpes and get blisters that are painful or happen often, there are medications you can take to help with this.



HERPES SIMPLEX VIRUS

## How are they different?

There are some differences in how each type of virus shows up on the body. In general, people with HSV-1 on the genitals get fewer outbreaks and less “asymptomatic shedding” (this happens when the virus is present on the skin but there are no visible symptoms) than people with HSV-2 on the genitals. HSV-2 does not often occur on the mouth, but when it does, it causes fewer outbreaks and less asymptomatic shedding than HSV-1.

Having one type of herpes may provide some degree of protection against getting the second type, but it is still possible to get both HSV-1 and HSV-2.

# Herpes symptoms

Herpes symptoms can range from none to severe. Many people have such mild outbreaks that they may not notice them. Other people may have uncomfortable or painful outbreaks.

## GENERAL SYMPTOMS CAN INCLUDE:

- One or more sores that look like water blisters, cuts, or broken skin
- The skin can feel itchy, tingling, burning, raw, or painful
- Fever, headache, or muscle aches
- Feel tired and not well

## SYMPTOMS OF GENITAL HERPES CAN INCLUDE:

- Pain in your legs or buttocks
- The lymph nodes in the groin can be swollen and tender
- Painful urination (peeing)
- A change in vaginal discharge
- Swollen genitals

## Prodrome symptoms

About half the people with herpes will experience prodrome symptoms, which are physical sensations that show up before an outbreak (when the virus is active along nerve endings). Prodrome symptoms can include itching or tingling in the area where outbreaks usually occur, or a pain down the back of the leg or in the buttocks (with genital outbreaks).

Sometimes, prodrome symptoms will show up but a full outbreak won't happen. For people who get them, prodrome symptoms can be a helpful early warning that an outbreak may be coming on.

## Types of outbreaks

Herpes infections are separated into three different outbreak types: primary first outbreak, non-primary first outbreak, and recurrent outbreak.

## PRIMARY FIRST OUTBREAK

A true primary first outbreak happens when someone first gets herpes. Whole-body symptoms, like fever, headache, muscle aches, and feeling tired and unwell, are more common with a primary outbreak. The herpes sores may also be quite painful. A primary outbreak is generally worse than future outbreaks. However, many people with true primary outbreaks still don't have severe symptoms.

For people who get sores, they often begin as blisters, then break open and form ulcers. On skin, these ulcers may form little crusts that eventually fall off. On mucous membranes, like the inner labia of the vagina, the ulcers will heal without crusts forming.

During a primary first outbreak, it is not uncommon to get a second outbreak about one week after the first outbreak. This entire outbreak period usually lasts 2–4 weeks, but can be shorter if medication is taken within the first 72 hours after the start of the outbreak.

## NON-PRIMARY FIRST OUTBREAK

A non-primary first outbreak happens when someone who already has one type of herpes gets the second type. For example, a person that already has HSV-1 on their mouth gets HSV-2 on their genitals.

A non-primary first outbreak is often not that severe, and the person may not think it is herpes. A non-primary first outbreak is not as likely to have the full-body symptoms or be as painful as a primary first outbreak. Sores and other symptoms may still be uncomfortable, but likely will not last as long as a primary first outbreak.

## RECURRENT OUTBREAK

Once someone has already had a first outbreak, they may get recurrent or repeat outbreaks. Not everyone who gets a primary or non-primary first outbreak will get recurrent outbreaks. The pattern of recurrent outbreaks is different with each person. Some people may never get recurrent outbreaks, some people may have several outbreaks a year, and some people may get regular outbreaks (although this is not common). Recurrent outbreaks are most common in the first year, and generally reduce in frequency after this time.

The herpes virus normally lies dormant in the body. Herpes outbreaks happen when the virus is triggered and travels along nerve paths to the skin. Since the same group of nerves goes to the genitals, thighs, lower abdomen, rectum and buttocks, it is possible to get a recurrent outbreak of genital herpes anywhere in these areas. Each outbreak may not be in the exact same place as the first outbreak. This does not mean that the herpes has spread.

Most people do not experience the whole body symptoms of fever and aches with recurrent outbreaks. Area-specific symptoms such as itching, tingling skin or sores are the most common symptoms. Recurrent outbreaks typically last 2–10 days, but can be shorter if medication is taken within 72 of the start of the outbreak.

# Herpes transmission: how do you get herpes?

Herpes is passed by skin-to-skin contact between one person who has the virus and another who does not. This contact needs to be directly with the part of the body where a person has the virus. For example, if someone has oral herpes, their mouth is the area of the body that has the virus, not their genitals.

The type of contact that usually transmits herpes involves skin rubbing on skin, like kissing or sexual activity. It also is possible for herpes to be passed if one person touches the part of their body that has herpes (like their genitals) and then immediately touches another person's mouth or genitals. Sharing sex toys between one person and another without changing condoms or washing toys can also pass the virus. The chance of passing herpes is highest when there is an active outbreak (when sores or blisters are visible, or prodrome symptoms are present).

There is no risk of passing herpes through general household activities. You can't get herpes from a toilet seat or furniture, or from sharing a bed or hugging someone with herpes. The herpes virus is fragile and doesn't live

more than a few minutes on most surfaces. The virus is easily killed by soap and water. Unless an item, like a spoon or a towel, is going **directly** from one person's mouth or genitals to another person, there is no need to worry about sharing household items

## Can you get both types of herpes?

There are two types of herpes virus: HSV-1 and HSV-2. HSV-1 is often called the cold sore virus and HSV-2 the genital herpes virus. However, either type can be in either location. You can have one type of herpes and still get the second type. For example, you can get HSV-1 on your mouth during childhood, and still get HSV-2 years later through sexual contact.

It is rare to get the same type of herpes on two different areas of the body. This means that if you have HSV-1 on the mouth, you should not get HSV-1 on the genitals. When you are exposed to herpes, your body starts to form antibodies that will protect you if you are exposed to this type of herpes again. This usually happens 21–42 days after you are

first exposed. However, during this period – before your body has fully formed the antibodies – it is possible to still get herpes on other parts of your body.

For this reason, it is important to avoid touching the blisters or sores and then touching other parts of your body. This can happen if a person kisses and receives oral sex from a person with HSV-1; they may get HSV-1 on both their mouth and their genitals. This can also happen if a person has their first HSV outbreak and rubs a blister (like on their mouth), then touches another part of their body (like their genitals) right afterwards. Washing your hands after touching the blisters will lower the chances of passing the virus to another part of your body. Once your body has fully formed antibodies, it is not possible to transfer the virus from one part of the body to another.

## What is “asymptomatic shedding”?

Herpes can be passed more easily when a person is having an outbreak and active sores or blisters are on the skin. However, herpes can still be passed when there are no sores or blisters. When the virus is present on the skin but there are no signs or symptoms, it is called “asymptomatic shedding”.

Asymptomatic shedding (also called “viral shedding”) can happen at any time. There is no way to tell when the virus is shedding on the skin, and no way to predict when you may be at risk of passing the virus to a sexual partner. Some research suggests that most people get herpes through asymptomatic shedding. Viral shedding is most common right before, during, and immediately after an outbreak.

## Lowering your chances of getting herpes

There are many things you can do to lower your chances of getting or passing herpes.

### KNOWLEDGE AND COMMUNICATION

Knowing if you or your partner has herpes lets both of you work together to lower the

chance of passing it on. Talking honestly and openly to your partner about your sexual health is a good way to share knowledge and also helps to reduce shame and stigma.

### LESS CONTACT DURING OUTBREAKS

If an outbreak is present, partners should not have skin-to-skin contact with the area of the body that has blisters or sores. You can still enjoy sexual activity, but avoid any skin-to-skin contact with the outbreak area. For example, if you have a sore on your mouth, don't give oral sex, but genital contact is fine.

### TESTING

Herpes testing is generally only done when there are symptoms present. A swab can be taken from any unusual lumps, bumps or sores around the genitals, anus or mouth.

If one partner has a laboratory-confirmed diagnosis and knows the type of herpes they have, the other partner may want to get a type-specific blood test. A type-specific blood test can't tell you where on the body you have herpes, but it will tell you if you have antibodies to one or both types of herpes. If you have antibodies to one type of herpes, you won't get that type again.

### BARRIERS AND PROTECTION

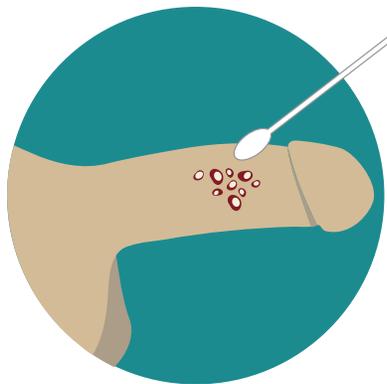
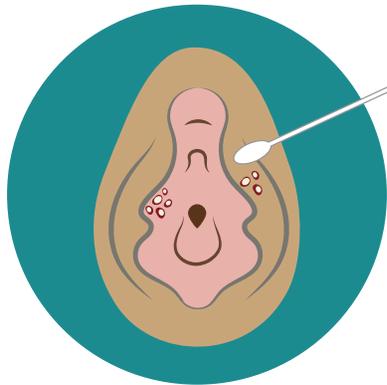
Using barriers, such as internal (female) or external (male) condoms and dental dams, reduces the possibility of getting or passing herpes. Condoms offer good protection, but do not completely prevent transmission because they do not cover the entire genital area. Dental dams can also be used as a barrier during oral sex. Some people use non-microwaveable saran wrap as an oral sex barrier, though the effectiveness of this is not known. Make sure you use a new barrier for each sexual activity. Never use the same condom twice and don't flip over dental dams.

Condoms can also be used on sex toys. If you share sex toys without condoms, wash each toy thoroughly in hot soapy water before and after use.

### ANTIVIRAL MEDICATIONS

If you have frequent or painful outbreaks, using antiviral medication such as acyclovir, famciclovir and valacyclovir will help with symptoms, shorten the length of the outbreak, and lower your chances of passing herpes. This medication can either be taken at the first sign of an outbreak, or as a daily treatment to help prevent outbreaks and asymptomatic shedding.

# Herpes testing: when is it useful?



The best time to test for herpes is when you have symptoms of an outbreak. A swab that is taken from an active sore can give you the best information. The swab test can tell you if the sore on your mouth or genitals is caused by the herpes virus and which type of herpes it is (HSV-1 or HSV-2), but not how long you have had herpes. For the best results, it is important to **have the sores swabbed within 72 hours of seeing the symptoms**. If the sores have already started to heal, the test may not pick up the virus; **in this case, a negative test result will not mean that you don't have herpes**.

People are often surprised to learn that herpes is usually only tested if you are showing symptoms. To understand why, it is useful to know about the limits and benefits of other types of herpes testing.

## Limits of herpes testing

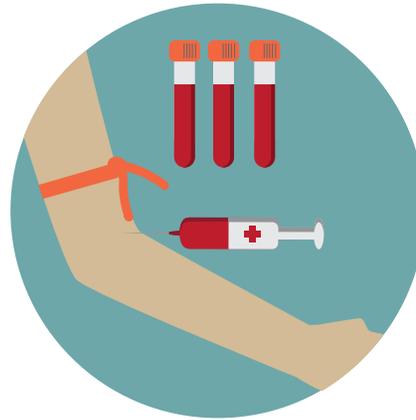
There are blood tests that can test for herpes, even if no symptoms are present. But these tests give limited information and may not be that useful for sexual decision making.

- The **non-type specific blood test** will tell you if you have antibodies to the herpes virus, but it does not say which type of herpes you have. It will not tell you where on your body you have herpes (oral or genital) or how long you have had it.
- The **type-specific blood test** will tell you if you have antibodies for a specific type of herpes (HSV-1 or HSV-2), but it does not say where on your body you have herpes or how long you have had it. HSV-1 and HSV-2 can occur on both the mouth and the genitals. Without symptoms and a swab from a sore, there is no way to definitively diagnose genital or oral herpes from this test alone.

In cases where blood testing is recommended, most health care providers will recommend the non-type specific antibody test first, since it is free and more widely available in British Columbia. If the person tests positive for herpes antibodies, they can then get the type-specific antibody test to find out which type of herpes they have. In British Columbia, this test is usually not free even if you have Medical Services Plan (MSP) coverage (the cost is about \$130).

Most people will test positive because herpes is so common. One recent study in British Columbia showed that almost 14% of the population has HSV-2, and this statistic goes up to 19% by age 35. There are no current British Columbia statistics on HSV-1, but several Canadian studies suggest that up to 89% of Canadians have antibodies to HSV-1. This means that the majority of people will already test positive to one or both types of herpes.

While a blood test can tell you if there are antibodies present, it cannot tell you where on the body you have the virus, how you got it, when you got it, who you got it from, if you will ever get symptoms, or how often you might have outbreaks. This means it does not give you useful information for sexual decision-making.



## When is blood testing recommended?

It can be helpful to get the type-specific blood test in certain situations. For example, if you have a sexual partner who has a laboratory-confirmed diagnosis of HSV-1 or HSV-2, it is useful to know if you have antibodies to the same type of herpes. If you have these antibodies, you will not get this type again, even on a different part of your body. If you don't have herpes antibodies, it means there is a possibility you can get the virus and you can take steps to reduce your chances (like using condoms).

Herpes blood testing is also recommended if someone without herpes symptoms becomes pregnant and they have a partner with a laboratory-confirmed herpes diagnosis. If herpes is passed to a pregnant person after the second trimester, it can cause serious complications for

the baby, so it is useful to know if the pregnant person already has antibodies to herpes. If they have the same antibodies as their partner, there is no need for concern. If they do not, they can talk to their health care provider about ways to reduce their chances of getting herpes.

Herpes blood testing is also recommended for people who are HIV positive and for HIV negative partners of people who are HIV positive. This is because herpes can cause complications in HIV positive people, and there is also an increased chance of passing or getting HIV during a herpes outbreak. For example, if a person is HIV negative but has a herpes outbreak on their mouth or genitals, and the sores come into contact with body fluids (like semen or vaginal or anal fluid) that contain HIV, the virus is more easily able to enter the body through the herpes sores. In a relationship where one person has HIV and the other does not, some people may choose not to have sex or to use condoms during a herpes outbreak.

Blood testing for herpes is also useful if someone has had recurring sores and at least two swab tests have come back negative.

If you're still wondering if herpes testing is necessary for you, talk to a health care professional.

# Herpes treatment: managing your symptoms

Herpes is a viral infection that does not need treatment unless outbreaks are causing pain or discomfort. Many people find that they get fewer outbreaks over time, even without treatment.

There are two kinds of treatment available for people who need help managing their symptoms:

- Antiviral medication
- Symptom management strategies

At this time, there is no cure for herpes. Any products or treatments sold online (or elsewhere) that claim to cure herpes have not been clinically proven to be effective. While there has been research into a herpes vaccine, there is no vaccine currently available for herpes.

## Antiviral medications

There are three antiviral medications that can help suppress the herpes virus in the body and lessen outbreaks: valacyclovir (Valtrex), acyclovir (Zovirax) and famcyclovir (Famvir). Research shows that all three are equally effective.

If you have a confirmed diagnosis of herpes, think about asking your health care provider for a prescription to have on hand even if you're not having symptoms. This way, you can quickly start on the medication if you feel the warning signs of an outbreak (tingling, itching or any signs of blisters forming). Taking these medications as soon as possible may either stop the outbreak completely or make it shorter and less painful.

If you are getting 6 or more outbreaks a year, you may want to think about daily suppressive therapy. This involves taking a small dose of medication every day to reduce the frequency of outbreaks and lessen the amount of asymptomatic shedding (when the virus is present on the skin but there are no symptoms).

## Alternate therapies

There are a number of alternate therapies that are sometimes recommended for herpes, including lysine, zinc and propolis. Some people may have relief of their symptoms when using these products, but overall, there is not enough research to say that these treatments are effective.

If you are considering an alternative treatment, talk to your health care provider or a pharmacist first. Any medications, including natural remedies, can have side effects and may end up irritating the sores and making them worse.

## TO MANAGE SYMPTOMS, TRY:

- Taking acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil) to help with pain.
- Eating well and getting plenty of rest.
- Reducing emotional or physical stress.
- Putting an ice pack (wrapped in a towel) on the sore skin for a short period of time.



### *For genital herpes*

- Wearing loose fitting clothes and comfortable cotton underwear during an outbreak to decrease friction and rubbing of the sore skin.
- Taking warm baths or using a portable bath (like a Sitz bath - a warm, shallow bath for the genital area).
- If urination (peeing) hurts, pour warm water over your genitals when urinating, or pee when you are in a warm shower or bath. Sitz baths may also help with this.
- Keeping the skin area dry.
- To prevent irritating the skin more, use a blow dryer on the cool setting to dry area after bathing instead of using a towel, or else use a towel to gently pat the area dry (do not rub).



## AVOID:

- Putting any medication on your skin until you have seen a health care provider.
- Breaking open any blisters.
- Having any skin-to-skin sexual contact with the area of your body where there are blisters or sores, unless you and your partner(s) have discussed this and are both comfortable with it.
- Directly touching or picking at the sores. Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water if you do touch the blisters or sores.

### *For genital herpes*

- Sitting for long periods.
- Wearing synthetic fabric underwear, or nylons without cotton lining.
- Wearing tight-fitting clothing that rubs against the sore area.

# What does herpes mean to you: receiving a new diagnosis

If you have just been told that you have herpes, you may feel overwhelmed at first. Remember that you are not alone and you will be okay. Herpes is a common condition and many people have gone through the same thing.

For some people, finding out they have herpes isn't a big deal. Other people may have a harder time with it. It is common for many people to have intense and difficult feelings at first. These feelings may include fear, shame, shock, guilt, blame, anger, helplessness, depression and hopelessness. While these feelings are natural, they won't last forever. Over time, these feelings will get less intense or go away completely.

It can take some time to work through, but a herpes diagnosis does not define who you are or affect your worth as a person.

## Coping with crisis

If you're feeling so overwhelmed that you can't concentrate at work or school, are having trouble sleeping or doing everyday activities, or are thinking about hurting yourself – you are likely in crisis.

The important thing to focus on is getting out of crisis before dealing with anything else. You can take as much time as you need afterwards to come to terms with herpes.

Managing crisis starts with taking care of yourself. Take time to go for a walk each day or find some other form of exercise that works for you. Talk to someone you trust, like a friend, relative, doctor, nurse, or counsellor. The BC Crisis line is an anonymous, confidential resource that you can call 24 hours a day.

## CRISIS LINE INFORMATION

### Telephone services

BC CRISIS LINE *from anywhere*

☎ 1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433)

VANCOUVER

☎ 604-872-3311

SUNSHINE COAST / SEA TO SKY

☎ 1-866-661-3311

TTY

☎ 1-866-872-0113

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT LINE

☎ 310-6789

SENIORS DISTRESS LINE

☎ 604-872-1234

### Online chat services

FOR YOUTH (FROM NOON TO 1AM)

💻 [www.YouthInBC.com](http://www.YouthInBC.com)

FOR ADULTS (FROM NOON TO 1AM)

💻 [www.CrisisCentreChat.ca](http://www.CrisisCentreChat.ca)

## Taking care of yourself

If you are having intense feelings about your herpes diagnosis, taking care of yourself is an important first step towards dealing with these feelings. Develop your self-care strategies. Think about what makes you feel good, grounded and comfortable.

Take time to breathe deeply, eat as well and as regularly as you can, try to get enough sleep so that you feel rested. If you are having physical pain from an outbreak, look at ways to manage and lessen your symptoms (find tips in the **Herpes Treatment** section).

Physical activity can help to lower anxiety and depression. Try stretching, walking, running, dancing, going to the gym, yoga, gardening, playing with your children, or any other form of activity that gets your body moving.

Being creative can also be helpful for working through intense feelings. Try playing music, drawing, painting, knitting, sewing, building, planning, crafting, home improvement, or any other creative project that you enjoy.

Take time for quiet self-reflection if you need it, and be gentle with yourself. Being connected to others can help too. This could mean talking to a trusted friend or just enjoying general social time with friends and family. And find things that give you comfort and pleasure, such as journaling, watching a favorite show, listening to music, gaming, a warm bath, a hug or cuddle from someone supportive, or quiet time with your pets.

If you find that you are turning to less-helpful strategies for comfort, like excessive drinking, substance use, gambling, shopping or eating, be kind and gentle with yourself. It is normal to try and comfort yourself in difficult times. It may help to make a list of things that you know are better for you, and keep it on hand to look at when you want to do something that is less helpful.



## Looking for information

Learning more about herpes is a great way to empower yourself, but sometimes anxiety can get in the way of this being helpful. If you are finding that asking questions and looking for information is making your anxiety worse, or you are looking for answers to the same questions over and over again, you may want to take some time out from your research and come back to it later.

If you want to look for more information on herpes, it is most useful to focus your search on resources with accurate and up-to-date information (see the **Herpes Resources** section).

# What does herpes mean to you: accepting your diagnosis

Keeping a sense of hope can help you come to a better understanding of what herpes means to you. Your value as a person has not changed and you still have control and choices over your future. This is sometimes hard to believe if you are having negative thought patterns. Having compassion for yourself, being aware of negative thought patterns, and finding ways to reframe negative beliefs can all help.

If you are having a lot of racing thoughts, or thoughts that seem to circle around and around, try to slow down. Try stopping and taking 10 deep breaths. After that, look at your thoughts without judging them. It may be helpful to write them down. Are you hearing a lot of “never” or “always” phrases, thinking of worst-case scenarios, blaming or shaming yourself, or focusing on denial or hopelessness? If so, try to reframe them in a way that offers you options and solutions.

Let's look at some options for reframing negative thoughts in a way that makes space for hope and change:

**ORIGINAL THOUGHT:** *“I can never date or have sex again.”*

**NEW THOUGHT:** *“I don't yet know how to talk to new or current sex partners about this.”*

**Solution:** *Know that it's okay to not have all the answers yet. You can learn more about herpes and how to talk with new partners about having herpes.*

**ORIGINAL THOUGHT:** *“I can't believe this happened to me!”*

**NEW THOUGHT:** *“I'm overwhelmed right now, so it's hard to come to terms with this diagnosis.”*

**Solution:** *Take care of yourself first. You will be better able to cope once you have taken care of your own needs. This can start with something as simple as having a glass of water, a meal, or a good night's sleep.*

**ORIGINAL THOUGHT:** *“I can never tell anyone about this.”*

**NEW THOUGHT:** *“I feel a lot of shame at the thought of talking about this with others.”*

**Solution:** *Have compassion for yourself. Know that many people have herpes and that it is not a shameful thing. Most people find it helps to share their feelings with a trusted friend or family member.*

**ORIGINAL THOUGHT:** *“I feel I'm dirty now, like used goods.”*

**NEW THOUGHT:** *“I'm aware that my self-esteem is being affected by this news and this is temporary.”*

**Solution:** *Having herpes does not change your value as a person. Be gentle with yourself, and do things that help you feel valued and cared for.*

If you are having difficulty reframing thoughts in this way, you may find counselling to be useful (see **Options for Counselling** section).

## Feeling stuck

It is normal to need time to come to terms with finding out you have herpes. A small number of people feel stuck and have problems moving forward. They may have complicated feelings which can lead to a negative self-image, avoiding romantic or sexual relationships, or a feeling of low self-worth.

You could get stuck in these cycles for many reasons. These could include:

- You were raised in an environment where sex was not talked about, or where there was a lot of judgment about sex.
- You have negative past experiences or associations with sex.
- You have a past history of sexual trauma or abuse.
- You got herpes from a partner who you feel betrayed your trust.
- You got herpes from a sexual assault or from an abusive relationship.
- You have dysphoria (intense unease or dissatisfaction) or discomfort with your genitals.
- You live with physical or mental health conditions.

If you are feeling stuck, give yourself permission to take your time. It's okay to have complicated feelings including anger, sadness, blame, and guilt. You do not need to blame yourself for having these feelings. Know that whatever happened, this was not your fault and you are still the same person you were before. You are a person of value and you deserve to have a happy and fulfilled life.

If the feelings are overwhelming, are going on for months, or are affecting your ability to function, think about getting outside support. Have you talked to a trusted friend, family member, or health care professional? You may find it useful to explore counselling, which offers a safe, confidential space to work through your feelings. Counselling is not covered by the Medical Services Plan (MSP) in BC, but some extended benefit plans may cover the cost. Schools and workplaces often offer free counselling through Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) or health centres. These services are confidential and no one will ever know the reason for your visit. There are also sliding-scale, low cost and free counselling options for people with financial barriers (see **Options for Counselling** at the end of this toolkit).



# What does herpes mean to you: dating with herpes

People with herpes have active and fulfilling dating and sex lives. It is normal to take time to adjust to a new diagnosis of herpes. You can take as much or as little time as you need to feel comfortable before dating and being sexually active.

## Talking to partners

You may be wondering if you should talk to your partner(s) and how you should do it. Many people find that sharing information about sexual health increases a feeling of honesty in sexual relationships, but talking to your partner is your decision to make. For example, you might choose to share this information with some people and not with others. It can feel difficult to tell your partner, but you may find it empowering. Telling them frees you from the feeling that you are keeping a secret, and helps your partner(s) to make informed choices. However, depending on your situation, you may not want or you may not feel safe to tell your partner – in this case, you should make the decision that is best for you.

When you first talk to a partner about herpes, you may worry about what sort of reaction they will have. While reactions can vary, remember that herpes is very common. Given that up to 89% of Canadians have herpes, you may find that your partner is already aware of it. They might have it themselves or they dated someone who did.

Your partner may have questions or need some time to process this news. They may ask if they can think about it and come back to you later. You can give them good sources of information to help them process. It is less common to meet an out-right rejection, but if this does happen, know that this is not a rejection of you.

Good communication can help increase the chance of a positive reaction. These communication tips and scripts will give you a starting point for how to navigate dating with herpes.

## Communication tips

### NO BLAMING OR SHAMING

Herpes is a common infection. It is not a punishment for doing something wrong, and it does not make you or your partner a bad person. You do not need to blame yourself or anyone else for having herpes, and you do not need to apologize for having it.

### STAY NEUTRAL

When you talk about herpes, keep information and facts accurate without using negative or “worst-case” language. For example, rather than calling herpes “incurable,” which is a word often used for fatal illnesses, think about calling it “recurrent.”

### KNOW YOUR FACTS

You may find it helpful to research herpes so that you have accurate information and resources to share, and can answer some of the questions that could come up.

## GOOD TIMING

If you can, have the discussion about herpes well before sexual contact takes place and not right after a make-out session. It's best to talk when neither of you is tired or stressed, or under the influence of alcohol or other substances.

## CONSIDER YOUR SETTING

Talk in private or in a quiet area where you feel comfortable. If you feel shy about making eye contact while talking, think about going for a walk or drive together.

## OWN YOUR FEELINGS

It's okay to be nervous, especially the first time that you talk about herpes with your partner. It's also okay to tell your partner that you are nervous about having this conversation.

## HONOR YOUR HONESTY

It's not always easy to talk about sex or sexual health in general. Give yourself credit for starting this conversation!

## Sample scripts for talking with partners

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### NEW PARTNERS

*“It feels like our relationship may become sexual. Before that happens, I’d like to let you know that I have the virus that causes herpes. I’ve got lots of information about herpes and I’m happy to answer any questions that you have.”*

*“I’m really attracted to you, but before we go any further, I’d like to talk about sexual health. I feel you should know that I have a very common infection – herpes. I know a lot about it and am happy to answer any questions you have.”*

### EXISTING PARTNERS

*“I have something I’d like to let you know about. I recently found out that I have herpes. I’m still learning about it, but am happy to share any information that I have. We can go through the information together and talk about it.”*

*“I know we haven’t had a chance to talk about this before, but you’re important to me and I’d really like to discuss sexual health with you. One thing I’d like to share about my own sexual health history is that I have herpes.”*

*I have something to tell you that isn’t easy for me to say, which is why I haven’t brought it up before. I’d really like to talk about sexual health with you, because I have herpes.*

### CASUAL PARTNERS

*Before we hook up, I’d like to let you know that I have herpes. I’m not having an outbreak right now, which means that it is unlikely for me to pass the virus, and using condoms would lessen this chance even more. If you want to talk about it now, I’m happy to answer any questions you might have.*

*Before we hook up, I’d like to let you know that I have the virus that causes herpes. I’m having an outbreak on my genitals right now, which means there is a good chance that I could pass this virus to you. Using condoms would lessen this chance, or we could have other kinds of sex instead. If you want to talk about it now, I’m happy to answer any questions you might have.*

These scripts are only a starting place – it's fine to use words that feel more natural to you. You may want to share a little from your personal experience with herpes at some point, including how you manage the symptoms.

*I've had herpes for nine years, and I rarely get outbreaks anymore. Since there is still the chance of passing it even when I don't have symptoms, it's still important to me that I tell people I hope to be intimate with.*

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*I've had herpes for a year and I get outbreaks every few months. I take antiviral medication when that happens. This helps speed up healing and sometimes stops the outbreak entirely if I catch it early enough. I also use condoms to lower the chance of transmission.*

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*I've got herpes in the form of cold sores on my mouth. Like lots of people, I've had this since I was a child. I don't kiss or give oral sex when I have an active outbreak.*

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*I've just learned that I have herpes. I found out that it's a very common infection. I'm trying to get as much good information about it as I can and I can share this information with you if you like.*

## Online dating and herpes

Sometimes, people choose to use dating sites that are specifically for those living with herpes. For some people, these sites take the pressure off and provide a safer space to connect with others who have shared experiences. However, many people also use dating sites that don't have a focus on herpes. It is okay to use either – the decision is yours to make.



# Herpes and pregnancy

People with genital herpes can still have a safe pregnancy and a vaginal birth. If you know that you have genital herpes, your health care provider or a specialist can take steps to protect the baby. The chances of passing herpes to a newborn is less than 1% in people who have a history of herpes or who get genital herpes during the first half of their pregnancy.

If you have a history of genital herpes, your body will have already produced antibodies which will protect the baby during pregnancy and delivery. Even if herpes is active in the birth canal during delivery, the antibodies will help to protect the baby.

If you do not have symptoms of genital herpes (including the warning signs of an oncoming outbreak) during labor, you can deliver vaginally. People who are having a herpes outbreak or prodromal symptoms when they go into labor will likely be recommended to deliver by C-section to help lower the risk of passing herpes to the newborn.

## Getting herpes later in pregnancy

Newborn babies are most at risk from herpes if the pregnant person gets genital herpes late in their pregnancy. The risk of passing the virus to the baby during a vaginal birth is about 30%–50% among people who get genital herpes near the time of delivery. This is because a newly infected person does not have antibodies against the virus, so there is no natural protection for the baby during birth.

A new herpes infection is usually active, so there is a real chance that the virus will be present in the birth canal during delivery. In these situations, a C-section delivery will likely be recommended.

## Preventing herpes in newborns

Preventing herpes in a newborn baby depends on two things:

- Avoiding getting a genital herpes infection during late pregnancy.
- Avoiding exposing the newborn to herpes sores and asymptomatic (or viral) shedding during delivery.

If you do not have herpes, avoid any type of sex (oral, genital or anal) that involves direct contact with your genitals or anus during your third trimester with partners that you know or think have herpes.

If you can't be sure that you have ever had oral herpes (cold sores on your mouth), it is best to not have oral sex during your third trimester with partners that you know or think have oral herpes.

If a newborn baby gets herpes, it is called neonatal herpes and can cause serious health problems or death. Neonatal herpes can

appear a few days to a few weeks after birth. The baby may have a single sore or many sores on the skin, a rash, seem tired, not feed well, or may have breathing problems. If you suspect your newborn has herpes, seek medical care immediately.

## Lowering the chances of passing herpes to a child

Herpes in childhood is very common and is not a serious condition. A baby or young child can get herpes from being kissed by a person who has herpes on their face. Any person with active herpes on the face (cold sores) is advised not to kiss or have mouth-to-skin contact with a baby or child.

Sometimes, people are concerned that herpes sores indicate childhood sexual abuse. Unless the sores are present on the genitals or anus, this is extremely unlikely.



## Online & phone

### SMART SEX RESOURCE: HERPES SIMPLEX VIRUS

 [smartsexresource.com/herpes](http://smartsexresource.com/herpes)

### BRITISH COLUMBIA OPTIONS FOR SEXUAL HEALTH – SEX SENSE

Submit questions through the website and get an email response.

 [www.optionsforsexualhealth.org/sex-sense](http://www.optionsforsexualhealth.org/sex-sense)

### UPDATED HERPES HANDBOOK (AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH)

This handbook is available for free online. Print copies can also be purchased.

 [www.westoverheights.com/herpes/the-updated-herpes-handbook/](http://www.westoverheights.com/herpes/the-updated-herpes-handbook/)

### AMERICAN SEXUAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

Comprehensive information, facts and support for people living with herpes.

 [www.ashasexualhealth.org/stdsstis/herpes/](http://www.ashasexualhealth.org/stdsstis/herpes/)

### SEX SENSE PHONE LINE

This is a free, confidential sexual health referral and information service.

Open Monday to Friday 9 AM – 9 PM, PST

 1-800-739-7367 anywhere in B.C.

 604-731-7803 in the Lower Mainland

### USA NATIONAL HERPES HOTLINE

Operated by the American Social Health Association ([www.ashstd.org](http://www.ashstd.org)). Trained counsellors available to answer questions about herpes.

Open Monday to Friday 9 AM – 6 PM, EST

 919-361-8488

## Books

### MANAGING HERPES: LIVING AND LOVING WITH HSV

by Charles Ebel and Anna Wald

### THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT THE BAD NEWS

by Terri Warren

## Support groups

### VANCOUVER H FRIENDS

Social group in the Lower Mainland (Vancouver area) for all ages.

 [meetup.com/vancouverhfriends](http://meetup.com/vancouverhfriends)

## Herpes counsellors

### BC ASSOCIATION OF CLINICAL COUNSELLORS

 [bc-counsellors.org](http://bc-counsellors.org)

### JENN DE ROO, REGISTERED CLINICAL COUNSELLOR

Provides herpes counselling in Vancouver. Skype and telephone counselling also available.

 604-726-2183

 [jenn@genderoo.com](mailto:jenn@genderoo.com)

 [genderoo.com](http://genderoo.com)

### JOCELYN ROSE, REGISTERED CLINICAL COUNSELLOR

Based out of Saskatchewan, provides herpes counselling by Skype or telephone.

 306-648-2522

 [jocelyn@jocelynrose.com](mailto:jocelyn@jocelynrose.com)

 [jocelynrose.com](http://jocelynrose.com)

# Options for counselling services

Please note that choosing a counsellor or therapist to work with is a personal choice based on many factors.

This list is offered for people who are unsure of who to call or how to start. The BC Centre for Disease Control does not endorse any of the counselling services listed.

## EXTENDED BENEFITS

If you have extended health benefits through work or school, check with your human resources department or your insurance plan to see whether you are covered for counselling benefits.

You may be able to access counselling directly through your workplace or school, such as a counsellor in the school's medical centre, or a workplace Employee Assistance Program. You may be covered up to a certain amount through a particular counselling professional, such as a Registered Clinical Counsellor (RCC), Registered Social Worker (RSW) or Registered Psychologist (R. Psych). In this case, you can self-refer to the counselling professional, pay the therapist first and then get reimbursed through your extended health benefits.

Not all plans cover all types of counselling, so check with your plan first and confirm your counselling professional's credentials.

## Services provided free of charge

### CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION- BOUNCE BACK PROGRAM

This is free telephone coaching for people with mild to moderate depression with or without anxiety. Coaching is available in English, Cantonese, French and Punjabi. A doctor's referral is needed to access this program.

☎ 1-866-639-0522

📧 [cmha.bc.ca](http://cmha.bc.ca)

### CITY UNIVERSITY COUNSELLING CLINIC

#### *Broadway Youth Resource Centre in Vancouver*

This is free and confidential counselling and support services for youth up to age 24 and their families.

☎ 604-709-5729

✉ [cityucc@gmail.com](mailto:cityucc@gmail.com)

### NEW WESTMINSTER UBC COUNSELLING CENTRE

#### *New Westminster*

Provides free counselling for adults, children, and youth from September to June of each year. Daytime and evening appointments are available.

☎ 604-525-6651

📧 [ecps.educ.ubc.ca](http://ecps.educ.ubc.ca)

### SCARFE FREE COUNSELLING CLINIC UBC

#### *Vancouver*

Offers free counselling to adults, students and children over age 10 from September through April. Daytime and evening appointments are available.

☎ 604-827-1523

📧 [ecps.educ.ubc.ca](http://ecps.educ.ubc.ca)

## COMMUNITY – FREE COUNSELLING PROGRAM

### *Vancouver*

Offers counselling for members of the GLBTQ community.

☎ 604-684-5307

💻 [qmunity.ca](http://qmunity.ca)

## RESIDENTIAL HISTORICAL ABUSE PROGRAM

Offers free counselling for those who were sexually abused while under the care of the province (foster care, group homes, etc.)

☎ 604-875-4255

💻 [vch.ca](http://vch.ca)

## S.A.F.E.R SUICIDE ATTEMPT FOLLOW-UP EDUCATION & RESEARCH

Provides counselling and support to people who are feeling suicidal, those who have attempted suicide, and those who have lost someone to suicide.

☎ 604-675-3985

## SURREY YOUTH RESOURCE CENTRES

### *Community Counselling Clinic in Surrey*

Free counselling provided by graduate student interns for individuals, youth and families. Open to all Surrey residents and available at two locations (Newton and Guildford).

☎ 604-592-6200

💻 [pcrs.ca](http://pcrs.ca)

## Low-cost & sliding scale counselling services

### ADLER CENTRE - COUNSELLING CLINIC

#### *Greater Vancouver Area*

Offers individual and couples counselling. Counselling is provided by counselling psychology graduate students at the Adler Centre, supervised by an experienced clinician.

☎ 604-742-1818

💻 [adlercentre.ca](http://adlercentre.ca)

## FAMILY SERVICES OF GREATER VANCOUVER – COUNSELLING PROGRAM

Counselling fees are based on household income. The program offers Master's-level therapists and a dedicated intake worker who can also refer to other counselling services or groups. Offices are located in Vancouver, Richmond, Burnaby, New Westminister and Surrey.

☎ 604-874-2938

💻 [fsgv.ca](http://fsgv.ca)

### FAMILY SERVICES OF THE NORTH SHORE

#### *North Vancouver*

Professional counselling for residents of North Vancouver. Services are available in English, Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean and Farsi.

☎ 604-988-5281

💻 [familyservices.bc.ca](http://familyservices.bc.ca)

### LIVING SYSTEMS COUNSELLING

Individual, couple and family counselling using Bowen Family Systems Therapy. Lower-cost counselling is provided by supervised interns. Services available in Vancouver, North Vancouver, West Vancouver, Surrey and New Westminister.

☎ 604-926-5496 ext. 0

💻 [livingsystems.ca](http://livingsystems.ca)

## OAK COUNSELLING

### *Vancouver*

Secular counselling services provided at the Vancouver Unitarian Centre by supervised volunteers with Master's degrees in psychology or psychology-related fields. Individual, couples and family counselling available. Reduced fees available.

☎ 604-266-5611

💻 [oakcounselling.org](http://oakcounselling.org)

## MOOD DISORDERS ASSOCIATION OF BC – COUNSELLING AND WELLNESS CENTRE

### *Vancouver*

Individual therapy sessions are provided with certified counsellors or interns. Group therapy is also available.

☎ 604-873-0103

💻 [mdabc.net](http://mdabc.net)

## SUCCESS - INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY COUNSELLING PROGRAM

Sliding scale counselling offered in Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean and English with a focus on helping new immigrants of Chinese and other ethnic origins. Play and art therapy also available.

☎ 604-408-7266

💻 [successbc.ca](http://successbc.ca)

## CITIZENS COUNSELLING CENTRE

### *Greater Victoria*

Affordable counselling available on a sliding-scale to residents of Greater Victoria. Individual, couples and group counselling available.

☎ 250-384-9934

💻 [www.citizenscounselling.com](http://www.citizenscounselling.com)

## ISLAND INTEGRATED COUNSELLING SOCIETY

### *Nanaimo*

Affordable, donation-based counselling available for individuals, couples and families.

☎ 250.716.8888

💻 [islandintegratedcounselling.com](http://islandintegratedcounselling.com)

## Faith based services

### CATHOLIC FAMILY SERVICES

#### *Vancouver & Surrey*

Individual, couple and family counselling available to Catholic and non-Catholic families. Offices are located in Vancouver and Surrey.

☎ 604-443-3220

💻 [rcav.org](http://rcav.org)

### JEWISH FAMILY SERVICES – WEST COAST WELLNESS GROUP

#### *Vancouver*

Counselling services available for the Jewish and non-Jewish community.

☎ 604-637-3309

💻 [jfsa.ca/counselling](http://jfsa.ca/counselling)

### SALVATION ARMY COMMUNITY AND FAMILY SERVICES

#### *Vancouver*

Sliding scale, individual counselling is available. Support groups for women, parents and anger management available by donation.

☎ 604-872-7676

💻 [salvationarmyvcfs.com](http://salvationarmyvcfs.com)

## Counselling services provided on an hourly rate basis

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### BRITISH COLUMBIA PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Directory and referrals to Registered Psychologists in BC.

 604-730-0522 or 1-800-730-0522

 [psychologists.bc.ca](http://psychologists.bc.ca)

### BC ASSOCIATION OF CLINICAL COUNSELLORS

Directory and referrals to Registered Clinical Counsellors in BC.

 1-800-909-6303

 [bc-counsellors.org](http://bc-counsellors.org)