



**Big Brothers Big Sisters**

Abbotsford • Mission • Ridge Meadows

**Chapter 1:  
Healthy  
Bodies**

# HERPES

## Dispelling the Myths



When you hear the word “Herpes” you might think of a sexually transmitted disease that won’t affect you if you abstain from unsafe sex. If you hear of a friend or classmate that acquired herpes, you might assume he or she must have taken part in a risky behavior. In fact, Herpes is actually a common skin infection that affects a large number of Canadians, including many teenagers. Herpes does not discriminate, and can affect anyone who comes in contact with the virus, regardless of how safe they usually are. It’s good to know all the facts so you are able to protect yourself against Herpes.

**Did You Know that 50-80% of the North American Population has either Type 1 or Type 2 Herpes?**

### What is Herpes?

Herpes is a common viral skin infection that can cause:

- ◆ **Oral Herpes**—cold sores or “fever blisters” on or near the mouth.
- ◆ **Genital Herpes**—sores on the genitals or below the waist.

There are distinct herpes viruses:

- Herpes Simplex Type 1 (*HSV-1*)
- Herpes Simplex Type 2 (*HSV-2*)

Both virus can affect the oral or genital regions, but typically Type 1 occurs above the waist and Type 2 occurs below the waist. There is no cure for Herpes, but the symptoms can be treated and outbreaks can be reduced with medication.

Although there is serious social stigma attached to the virus (it has even been called a disease of the promiscuous), many people who acquire Herpes are in a loving relationship with a committed partner. If you have Herpes, remember that you are not alone. Millions of Canadians have Herpes, they just don’t necessarily talk about it. Herpes is just a virus like the cold or chicken pox. It doesn’t discriminate against who gets it and who doesn’t. If you are diagnosed with Herpes, you need to tell all current and future partners before becoming intimate. Not doing so is not only wrong, but can ruin a relationship when your partner finds out they were misled. Imagine someone lying to you about something so important. Be honest, responsible, and open with your partner – the right one will be understanding and willing to work around your diagnosis.

**Rest assured that normal and healthy relationships, including a normal sex life, are quite possible for people with Herpes, with a few extra precautions.**

#### KIDS HELP PHONE:

[1-800-668-6868](tel:1-800-668-6868)

#### Options for Sexual Health

1-800-SEX-SENSE

[www.optionsforsexualhealth.org](http://www.optionsforsexualhealth.org)

#### OPT Abbotsford Clinic:

(604) 855-7111

#### OPT Maple Ridge:

(604) 463-6268

#### OPT Mission

(604) 814-55022

#### BC Ministry of Health

[www.gov.bc.ca/health](http://www.gov.bc.ca/health)

#### PLANETAHEAD.CA

A fun interactive site on sexual health

#### STD Resource

BC’s Information Resource for STD’s

[www.stdresource.com](http://www.stdresource.com)

#### How Common is Herpes?

Genital Herpes is one of the most common STI’S in Canada, affecting 1 in 5 people. Oral Herpes is even more common, affecting over 50% of the population. Rates are higher in women (1 in 4) than in men (1 in 8), perhaps due to the fact that male-to-female transmission is more common than female-to-male transmission.

**Big Brothers Big Sisters of Abbotsford, Mission, Ridge Meadows:**

[www.mentoringworks.ca](http://www.mentoringworks.ca)



## What Are the Symptoms of Herpes?

The first outbreak of Herpes usually occurs 2 to 12 days after infection. Symptoms may last from 1-3 weeks then disappear and return at a later date. Symptoms vary but might include:



### ORAL HERPES

- Cold sores or small blisters on the lips or inside the mouth
- Fever, muscle aches and irritability
- Pain, burning or tingling at the infection site before blisters appear
- May lead to a painful throat and swollen tonsils

### GENITAL HERPES

- Pain or discomfort around the genitals, buttocks or legs
- Bumps, sores or fluid-filled blisters around the genitals, buttocks or legs.
- Swollen lymph nodes in the groin
- Itching or burning while urinating
- Flu-like symptoms (Fever, headache, chills, aches)
- Constipation or difficulty urinating

The first outbreak of Herpes usually involves more severe symptoms than later outbreaks. After the first infection, the virus becomes inactive for a period of time and doesn't cause any symptoms. This period is called *latent infection*. At a later time, the virus can "wake up" and start causing symptoms again. No one really knows what makes it reappear, but stress (which can cause a weakened immune system), other illnesses, the sun, or even regular menstruation in girls might provoke its return.

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## What Happens During Recurrences?

Additional flare-ups of herpes are called **recurrences** or **outbreaks**, and are most common in the first year after infection, usually occurring 4-5 times that year. New sores usually heal sooner and aren't as painful as the initial outbreak. Sometimes people can tell when an outbreak is about to happen because they feel tingling, numbness or tenderness that can start a few hours or a day before the sores begin to reappear. Sometimes the virus can become active again without causing symptoms like blisters or pain. Herpes is often spread during these times because people do not know that they are contagious. This is why its important to **always use an internal or external condom** (for genital herpes) or dental dam and don't share drinks, cigarettes, etc. (for oral herpes) even if you or your partner is not currently experiencing a Herpes outbreak.

## How Can I Protect Myself and Others Against the Herpes Virus?

Because it is so contagious, most people have been infected by at least one form of Herpes by the time they become adults. Here are a few tips to help prevent infection and outbreaks:

- ◇ Get more information. The more informed you are about herpes, the more prepared you are to help prevent the spread!
- ◇ Maintain general good health, eat nutritiously, get enough sleep and reduce the amount of stress in your life to make yourself less vulnerable.
- ◇ Avoid touching the saliva, lips, or skin of a person with cold sores. Don't kiss a person with cold sores or share a drinking glass, utensils, washcloth, napkin, cigarette, etc.
- ◇ Prevent Infection. Don't touch sores (even your own), and if you do, wash your hands with soap and hot water before touching another part of your body. Avoid touching infected areas until all sores are completely healed, not just scabbed over. Never pick at cold sores.
- ◇ Wear lip balm and sunscreen on your face when out in the sun, to prevent an outbreak of cold sores.
- ◇ The best way to avoid genital herpes is *abstinence*—not having sex. If you *are* sexually active:

\*Talk to your partner about Herpes and other STDs and how the two of you can take preventative measures.

\*Lower your exposure risk by decreasing your amount of sexual partners. Fewer partners = a lower chance of exposure.

\***Do not have sex** when you or your partner is having an outbreak—even with a condom. The virus is infectious until one week after the last sore has completely healed so avoid any forms of sexual contact if you see sores or bumps on your partner's genitals or mouth. Between outbreaks, always use a condom. When used properly, latex condoms help reduce your risk of spreading or acquiring herpes.

\* Girls should have an annual Pap smear to test for STDs, asking their doctors to specifically test for Herpes if they believe they might be at risk (if they have had skin to skin or sexual contact with a partner with herpes lesions).

### IF YOU OR YOUR PARTNER IS PREGNANT...

It is possible to pass the Herpes virus to a newborn baby. Tell your doctor if you or your partner are at risk for Herpes so he or she can take proper precautions to protect your baby from acquiring the disease.



### STAGES OF AN OUTBREAK:

*Note: Not all people with Herpes experience sores during an outbreak.*

**Sores develop:** Skin might become red, itchy or painful. A small area may swell, followed by small fluid-filled blisters emerging. Tender and raw wet ulcers appear when the tops of the blisters come off. A dry crust (scab) forms over the ulcer as the sore begins to heal. Healing is complete when the crust falls off or the sore dries without forming a crust.

**“Asymptomatic” Phase:** The virus is dormant and there will be no symptoms. However, the virus may be actively replicating. Even if you have no symptoms you can still potentially infect others.

**Reoccurrences:** After the primary infection, the Herpes virus becomes latent, “sleeping” deep inside the cells. Recurrences can be triggered by many things including fever (which is why the sores are sometimes called “fever blisters”) or even exposure to sunlight. Some people are able to learn what their triggers are and can avoid them.



### HOW CAN I TELL MY PARTNER THAT I HAVE HERPES?

**Honesty in a relationship is important, as it builds trust and respect. Your partner has the right to know if you have Herpes in order to make an informed decision.**

- Encourage your partner to learn more about Herpes with you. Bring a book or printed information on the virus that you and your boyfriend/girlfriend can refer to, or visit a doctor together.
- Be calm and answer all your partner’s questions. He or she might not know much about Herpes so it is up to you to set their misperceptions straight. Explain that you can still have a normal sexual relationship between outbreaks by using condoms. A good time to tell your partner is once you have established trust in your relationship, but before you become intimate.
- Explain that your relationship is important to you, and that you want him or her to know the truth because you care and don’t want a person you care about to get infected. Appear confident and in control to reassure your partner the situation is manageable.
- Accept that you may not get a positive response from your partner. It may have taken you a while to adjust to having Herpes and your partner will also need time to adjust to this news.

### HERPES MYTHS AND FACTS:

**Myth:** If you have Herpes, you can never have sex again.

**Fact:** People with Herpes can lead normal sex lives using proper precautions including avoiding sexual contact during outbreaks and always using a condom.

**Myth:** Genital Herpes can make you sterile.

**Fact:** While some STIs, like Chlamydia, can make you sterile, Genital Herpes cannot. Get tested for all STIs to stay safe.

**Myth:** You can’t get Genital Herpes from oral sex.

**Fact:** Herpes can be spread from your partner’s cold sore to your genitals and vice versa. It is important to use barrier protection like a condom (male or female) or dental dam during oral sex.

**Myth:** The only people who get Herpes are those who have had many sexual partners.

**Fact:** Genital Herpes is very common, affecting 1 in 5 people. You can get herpes even if you’ve only had one or two sexual partners, but your risk increases with every sexual partner you have. Oral Herpes is even more common, affecting most people by the time they reach adulthood. It can be acquired through something as basic as sharing a drinking glass.

**Myth:** A Herpes infection can turn into an HIV infection.

**Fact:** Herpes can make people more susceptible to HIV infection, and it can make HIV-infected individuals more infectious, but one does not cause the other.

**Myth:** People with Herpes cannot have children, because they will pass the virus on to their child.

**Fact:** If you have open sores when it comes time to give birth, you may be given a C-section instead of a natural birth to prevent infection of your newborn. Talk to your doctor about the best method for your specific case.

**Myth:** You can get Genital Herpes from a toilet seat.

**Fact:** Genital Herpes is a weak disease and dies quickly once it is exposed to the air. There are no documented cases of someone getting Herpes from a toilet seat.

### Can cold sores be dangerous?

For most people, cold sores are an embarrassing part of life and the worst result might be missing out on a party or postponing a date. For infants, or people with weakened immune system (eg. someone battling cancer) the virus can lead to a serious infection and even possibly death. Other complications can also result, such as an infection of the eye. If you have active herpes lesions limit your skin-to-skin contact, especially with babies and other at-risk people just in case!



## How do I talk to my Little about Herpes?

- ◆ Prepare yourself by considering the various tough questions your Little might ask, depending on their age and level of maturity.
- ◆ When asked a difficult question, pause to ask yourself whether or not you have enough information to answer your Little's question, if you are comfortable discussing the subject matter, and if this is the appropriate time to respond to their question.
- ◆ If you feel knowledgeable enough to answer the question, respond to your Little. Explain that this is your own opinion, and encourage them to seek out other perspectives by asking their parents the same question. Never see yourself as a sex educator or put yourself in that role. If your Little asks a question about Herpes, ask him or her what they already know about it to gauge an appropriate starting point for the conversation.
- ◆ Present honest, age-appropriate facts. You might tell an 8-year-old that Herpes is a disease that can cause blisters or cold sores and be passed from one person to another via kissing, while you might explore the topic of safe sex with a pre-teen. Reassure that while Herpes can be an unpleasant disease, it is preventable. Clear up any misconceptions.
- ◆ If you don't know how to respond, there is nothing wrong with telling your Little that it is such an important question you want to take some time to gather your thoughts, as well as more information on the issue. Ask permission to look into it and follow up on the question the next time you meet.
- ◆ If you really do not feel comfortable discussing the issue, you could tell your Little that it is a sensitive topic, and you don't want to influence him or her with your perspective. Encourage them to speak with their parents or help them identify another informed adult that they trust to ask.
- ◆ Foster self-esteem in your Little to empower him or her to make suitable decisions when faced with critical life choices and to avoid peer pressure when it comes to unsafe sex, etc.

### HOW CAN I TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GENITAL HERPES AND GENITAL WARTS (HPV)?

Genital Warts are a sexually transmitted infection caused by HPV—The Human Papilloma Virus, rather than HSV—the Herpes Simplex Virus. Genital Warts are a viral infection of the skin and may emerge weeks or months after infection. Symptoms of Genital Warts might include itching or burning around the genitals and painless growths that may begin as pink or red spots. The spots develop into white, yellow or gray warts on the genitals or anus, and can grow into oddly shaped “cauliflower-like” bumps. Genital Warts are usually painless but highly contagious. Genital Herpes, on the other hand, usually develops into a fluid-filled blister that then becomes a dry scab and heals. Wearing a condom is always a good idea, but it will not help protect against sores or warts that are in other areas not covered by a condom. Whether you think you have Genital Herpes or Genital Warts, you should abstain from sexual contact to avoid infecting others, and see your doctor right away for an accurate diagnosis.



## Resources

Available from the Fraser Valley Regional Library

### For TEENS (13-17)

- *Safe Sex 101: An Overview for Teens.* Margaret O. Hyde and Elizabeth H. Forsyth. Minneapolis: MN: Twenty-First Century Books, 2006.
- *You, Me & The Kids (DVD).* Kelowna, BC: Filmwest Associates, 2002.

### For BIG BROTHERS/BIG SISTERS & PARENTS

- *The Truth About Herpes.* Stephen L Sacks. West Vancouver, BC: Gordon Soules, 1997.
- *Herpes Simplex.* Philippa Harknett. London: Thorsons, 1994.
- *Straight Talk about Sexually Transmitted Diseases.* Michael Broadman, John Thacker and Rachel Kranz. New York: Facts on File, 1993.

### “WHAT IF MY BOYFRIEND/GIRLFRIEND HAS A COLD SORE? WILL I GET HERPES? DOES THAT MEAN HE OR SHE CHEATED ON ME?”

- Listen carefully and try not to be judgemental. A diagnosis of Herpes does not mean your partner has done anything wrong. For instance, if your partner has cold sores, he could have acquired them from sharing a cigarette or a drinking glass with an infected friend.
- Determine whether your partner has Type 1 or Type 2 Herpes, and learn more about Herpes before making serious decisions regarding your relationship. There are numerous ways to reduce the risk of transmission; staying with your partner does not mean you will necessarily become infected. Get all the facts before you make up your mind.
- Remember that it IS possible to spread Herpes from mouth to mouth contact, genital to genital contact, and mouth to genital contact. Avoid all forms of sexual contact during outbreaks (even kissing if sores are on the mouth and face), and use protection (internal or external condoms, dental dams) between outbreaks. Any area of the body is at risk, but herpes prefers moist mucous membranes such as the mouth or genitals.

**Thank you to the following members of our Panel for**

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