Basic Medical Facts about Herpes

Sources:

http://doctor.ndtv.com/topicdetails/ndtv/tid/426/Herpes_infection.html

http://www.mamashealth.com/stds/herpes.asp

What is herpes?

Herpes is a sexually transmitted disease (STD). A sexually transmitted disease is a disease that you get by having sex with someone who already has the disease. Genital herpes is a viral infection caused by the Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV). Once you are infected with herpes, the virus stays in your body for life.

Herpes is spread through direct contact. So, a genital herpes infection will stay in the area it originated unless transferred elsewhere via direct contact or skin-to-skin transference. Genital herpes won't just show up on its own somewhere else on the body. Because genital herpes is spread through direct contact, it is important to avoid contact with infected areas. Herpes is equally common in males and females.

Herpes can be of 2 types – HSV-1 and 2. HSV-1 is mostly responsible for infection above the waist while HSV-2 causes sores below the waist, usually in the genital area. Genital herpes is caused by HSV-2.

Herpes is different from other viral infections since it is lasts a lifetime. The virus remains latent or "sleeping" within the body and travels through nerve pathways to cause the symptoms. Because this virus remains dormant in the nerve roots for long periods, the symptoms can also manifest later in life.

How does someone get Herpes?

Most people get herpes by having sex or direct skin to skin contact with someone who has cold sores or blisters. When the sores are present, it means that herpes simplex virus is active. Sometimes a person can have a herpes outbreak and have no visible sores at all. People usually get herpes by having sexual contact with others who don’t know they are infected or who are having outbreaks of herpes without any sores. A person with genital herpes also can infect a sexual partner during oral sex.

Herpes is not spread through the air. It is spread by direct contact to the site of infection. If you have a cold sore and you kiss someone, you will transfer the virus to their mouth. If you have a cold sore and you have anal or vaginal intercourse, you will give your partner genital herpes.

What are the symptoms?
The main symptoms of herpes are the eruption of blisters or pimples, which crust over and then scab off. There may be some flu-like symptoms like fever, body ache and swelling of lymph nodes near the groin.

No symptoms of Herpes?

Herpes can be spread between outbreaks when there are no signs or symptoms present. This is called "Asymptomatic Transmission." Research shows that herpes simplex infections are often spread by people who don't know they are infected. This occurs because people may have symptoms so mild that they don't notice them at all or else don't recognize them as herpes.

How is the infection spread?

Herpes infection spreads through direct contact from one person to another. HSV-1, that usually affects the upper portion of the body, is spread by kissing and skin to skin contact. HSV-2 that causes genital herpes is spread through vaginal or anal intercourse and oral sex. Humans are the only known carriers of the infection. The infection can also be transmitted from a pregnant mother to her baby.

Will I ever have Herpes outbreaks again?

If you are infected by herpes simplex virus 1 and/or herpes simplex virus 2, you will probably have symptoms or outbreaks again. The herpes virus never dies. It merely falls asleep (dormant) like "Sleeping Beauty", Waiting to wake up under the right stimulation. Herpes outbreaks are not predictable.

If you experience an outbreak of herpes, avoid touching the sores. If you get the virus on your hands and may transmit it to other parts of your body. Oral herpes is easily transmitted through skin-to-skin contact so if you are experiencing an outbreak, avoid kissing others and sharing utensils.

What is the treatment?

There is still no known treatment to cure herpes. The symptoms can only be controlled with medication. Treatment can be given in two ways – episodic therapy and suppressive therapy. Episodic therapy is given during the active infection when the outbreak and its symptoms can be seen. This form of treatment provides considerable relief during the attack. Suppression therapy means taking the antiviral therapy even in times of dormancy.

Can genital herpes cause any other medical problems?

Usually, genital herpes does not cause major problems in healthy adults. If a woman has her first episode of genital herpes while she is pregnant, she can pass the virus to her unborn child and may deliver a premature baby. A baby born with herpes can develop problems that may affect the brain, the skin, or the eyes.