HSV
(Herpes Simplex Virus)

Infection Prevention

Information for patients

What is herpes simplex virus (HSV)?
Herpes simplex virus is a common and highly infectious virus that typically causes ‘cold sores’ as well as genital herpes. There are two types of HSV: herpes simplex virus 1 (HSV-1) and herpes simplex virus 2 (HSV-2).

Both HSV-1 and HSV-2 are spread by direct contact. Once you have had HSV-1 or HSV-2, the virus stays in your body for life and may cause symptoms to appear in the future.

Who is most at risk?
Anyone can get HSV. Around 90 percent of adults have HSV, but only about one third of people experience symptoms. HSV-1 infection usually happens in childhood. HSV-2 infections usually occur after the onset of sexual activity. HSV infection is lifelong; however, the frequency of experiencing symptoms usually decreases with time. People with weakened immune systems (e.g. people with HIV or those who have received transplants) are particularly vulnerable.

What are the symptoms?
HSV symptoms can appear on any part of the body. Most commonly, HSV-1 usually causes infection around the mouth, and HSV-2 usually causes infection around the genital area.

Symptoms of HSV-1 may include:
- tingling / itchiness / burning sensation around the skin or mouth before blisters appear
- blisters and ulcers, usually around the mouth or nose
- inflammation of the mouth and gums
- fever
- tiredness
- redness, swelling or pain around the affected areas
- sore throat
- swollen neck glands.

Most people have very mild or no symptoms of HSV-2. For those who have symptoms, these may include:
- blisters or ulcers around the affected area
- mild tingling or shooting pain in the legs, hips and buttocks before blisters appear
- unusual vaginal discharge.

Symptoms of HSV may persist for up to 14 days, especially if it is a person’s first infection, a young child, or someone with a weakened immune system. Illnesses including colds and flu, exposure to sunlight or wind, hormonal changes, and stress may trigger an outbreak of symptoms.
What treatments are available for herpes simplex virus?
There is no cure for HSV. Anti-viral medication may help to decrease the frequency of outbreaks and the severity of symptoms. Speak to your doctor to discuss the options that are available to you.

How is herpes simplex virus spread?
HSV infections are passed from person to person by direct contact with the infected area. For example, HSV-1 usually causes cold sores. The cold sores, saliva and surfaces around the mouth may be infectious and transmit HSV to another person through direct contact. People with symptoms of HSV should avoid contact with others when they have the sores or blisters – e.g. avoid kissing or sharing drink bottles if you have a cold sore.

HSV-2 is usually transmitted sexually and may cause genital herpes. Condoms may help to reduce (but cannot completely prevent) the risk of spreading genital herpes.

HSV can be passed from mother to child during childbirth or the immediate time after birth, and can be very serious for the baby. It is important to notify your doctor if you or your partner have symptoms of HSV during this time.

I have herpes simplex virus. How will I be cared for in hospital?
Isolation: In most cases, there will be no changes to your accommodation. However, if you have many blisters or are on a ward with patients who have a weakened immune system, you may be placed in a single room.

Hand hygiene: It is important that staff, patients and visitors clean their hands every time they enter or leave a room or cubicle. They can use the provided alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water.

It’s OK to ask: Please feel free to remind your health care worker to clean their hands.

Cleaning: Your room will be routinely cleaned and disinfected.

As a patient, what should I do?
- Try to avoid touching the affected area, but if this cannot be avoided, always clean your hands before and after touching.
- Let your doctor know if you are experiencing symptoms of HSV whilst in hospital.

What should my visitors do?
Your visitors should clean their hands on entering or leaving your room by using the alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water.