

KEY INFORMATION FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS TO GIVE PATIENTS IN COUNSELLING

The following information contributes significantly to people being able to normalise the meaning of a viral STI. The challenge for health professionals is to convey that they understand that a relatively innocuous infection in medical terms may, however, be experienced as life-changing for the person.

The following points are most likely to be effective when they are incorporated into the acknowledgement of the above psychosocial points.

- Approximately one in three people have genital herpes, but only 20% of them experience symptoms. (This includes genital herpes caused by both HSV-1 and HSV-2.)
- Most people (80%) who become infected with genital herpes will not have any symptoms or have such mild symptoms that they will not be recognised or diagnosed as genital herpes.
- For most people who experience symptoms genital herpes is a sometimes-recurring 'cold sore' on the genitals. It does not affect your overall health or longevity of life.
- A small percentage of people who get genital herpes may experience problematic recurrences. If this happens there is effective treatment available.
- People who experience a first episode of genital herpes will get better, lesions will heal and there will be no evidence of the initial lesions left.
- Most people who experience a first episode of HSV-2 will have recurrences, but they are generally milder than the first episode. HSV-1 tends to cause fewer recurrences than HSV-2.
- Over 75% of people get herpes from a partner who has no history of ever having had herpes.
- Getting genital herpes in a long-term relationship does not assert that the other partner has been unfaithful. However, a full sexual health screen may be reassuring.
- Genital herpes is more common in women as it is easier to transmit from men to women, than from women to men.
- Oral to genital transmission of HSV-1 is very common. This can happen when 'cold sores' are not causing symptoms.
- Genital herpes does not affect your fertility or stop you having children. Vaginal delivery is usual for most women with a history of genital herpes.
- Genital herpes does not stop you having sex.
- Anybody with genital herpes, whether they get symptoms or have never had symptoms, may shed the virus from time to time with no symptoms present.
- Only a small percentage of people with genital herpes get frequent recurrences.
- There is a very effective oral antiviral medication if genital herpes is problematic.
- There is no evidence that genital herpes causes cancer of the cervix.
- Condoms reduce the risk of transmission. The use of condoms in a long-term relationship should be a matter of discussion between the individuals. It is advisable to avoid genital-to-genital contact, even with a condom, until any lesions are completely healed.
- Even if the virus is passed on, the most likely outcome is that the person will never experience symptoms.

Herpes and Pregnancy (Key Information continued)

- Neonatal herpes is serious but extremely rare; one in 10,000 live births.
- The commonest cause of neonatal herpes is a woman experiencing a first episode (often asymptomatic) in the last trimester. Early medical management will minimise the risk.
- Recurrent herpes in pregnancy has a much lower risk of transmission. Maternal antibodies contribute to protecting the baby and viral shedding in recurrences is low. It is important to notify the health professional(s) managing the pregnancy of the previous history.
- Vaginal delivery is usual for most women with a history of genital herpes.
- While neonatal herpes is rare it is important that parents are instructed on which symptoms to look out for if there is any possibility of transmission. Knowledge of the early symptoms of neonatal herpes will enable such infants to present early and will increase the likelihood of a good outcome for the infant.

Ensure patients have access to the NZHF patient pamphlets and/or the Helpline toll free 0508 11 12 13, or www.herpes.org.nz