

Key Issues in Health Professionals' Counselling Management

Genital herpes is a common condition in people who are sexually active. However, conditioning and social values contribute to individuals having a range of emotional responses when given a diagnosis of genital herpes.¹¹²⁻¹¹⁵

EMOTIONAL FEELINGS RELATED TO THE DIAGNOSIS OF GENITAL HERPES

- Grief
- Guilt
- Embarrassment
- Sense of isolation
- Loss of assertiveness
- Unworthiness
- Shock
- Dirtiness
- Anger
- Sense of injustice
- Confusion
- Fear
- Surprise
- Denial

Good therapeutic management acknowledges these emotional responses and addresses the patient's feelings and concerns. The patient who presents with genital herpes for the first time is very vulnerable. The clinician/counsellor should acknowledge how difficult it must have been for the patient to present for treatment.¹¹⁶

Often the diagnosis is unexpected. The physician/counsellor should never be dismissive of the patient's disease; for some patients a diagnosis of genital herpes may be the most challenging health disruption they have ever experienced, given the stigma associated with sexually transmitted infections. The clinician/counsellor should show their empathy for the patient and allow the patient to talk. The counselling needs to take place at the patient's pace and not be rushed. If the patient is referred elsewhere for counselling, the diagnosing clinician should still address the acute issues at the first presentation.^{26,117}

Not all patients will want to take up the offer of counselling and support. Nevertheless, it is very important to offer it to all so that they can make this decision.

It is important that counselling and education about genital herpes take place in the appropriate setting. The following points should be considered:

- Comfortable setting
- Patient dressed
- Minimal interruptions
- Confidentiality assured
- Adequate time
- Attentive listening
- Avoidance of pejorative and prejudicial terms
- Empathic attitude
- Written information to take away and read
- Encouragement to return with list of questions

The education process may include answering questions about the natural history of the disease including the likely triggers for reactivation. Few solid data exist, but patient experience suggests that stress appears to be associated with recurrences in some patients. Advice on how to manage stress and lead a healthy lifestyle (exercise, good diet, etc.) should be given with care. Too much advice on lifestyle may be stressful for the patient, heightening feelings of guilt and the belief that the disease is self-inflicted.

Correct management of genital herpes is time-intensive. The likely impact of the disease on the patient and how well they are coping should be assessed. Psychological issues and concerns should start to be addressed at the first session. Many patients will be worried about the risk of having acquired HIV or other STIs or that they are seen to be promiscuous and may be worried about the doctor's opinion of them. In all cases (whether primary, non-primary or first symptomatic reactivation) the emotional consequences and perceived social stigma of the disease need to be addressed. The diagnosis of genital herpes will provoke a shock reaction in many patients and cause feelings such as guilt, anger, confusion and a sense of isolation.¹¹⁷⁻¹²¹ Patients with genital herpes are usually very concerned about the diagnosis of the disease, its potential impact on their lives and how their family and friends will view them. Common concerns of patients relate to the social stigma of the disease, transmitting the disease, fear of telling potential sexual partners who may then reject them and how it will affect their sex life and their social activities.¹¹⁴

The above section on counselling is based on internationally accepted standards of practice. **GRADE C**

COMMON CONCERNS OF PATIENTS WITH GENITAL HERPES

- Fear of discovery
- Intimate relationships and sex life affected
- Social activities and lifestyle altered
- Social stigma of STI
- Condition is 'incurable'
- Fear of transmission or contagion
- Fear of disclosure and subsequent rejection

Patients should be reassured that they are not alone in having genital herpes. The clinician or counsellor is encouraged to offer information about local herpes support groups and/or the NZ Herpes Foundation (toll free **0508 11 12 13**) or refer for specialist counselling to the local Sexual Health Clinic.