

STIEF 

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# Herpes Simplex

## Myths vs Facts



**THE NEW ZEALAND  
HERPES FOUNDATION**

# Herpes Myths vs Facts

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Herpes is common, manageable and treatable. This pamphlet seeks to dispel some of the myths around herpes.

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**MYTH** *Only certain sorts of people get herpes.*

**FACT** Herpes is very common and anyone who has ever had sex can get genital herpes. It's not about being clean, dirty, good or bad – it's just part of being sexually active.

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**MYTH** *Herpes isn't that common and I am unlikely to get it.*

**FACT** Herpes is very common and may be caused by both herpes simplex type 1 and type 2 (HSV-1 or HSV-2). HSV-1 causes "cold sores" on the face, and up to 80% of the population has type 1. About 50% of genital herpes is caused by HSV-1 and up to 22% of sexually active adults have genital herpes caused by HSV-2. Most people have no symptoms and therefore are unaware that they have herpes. 75% of people who acquire herpes get it from partners who are unaware they have it.

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**MYTH** *Herpes "cold sores" on the face are not the same as genital herpes.*

**FACT** Cold sores on the mouth or face are caused by HSV-1 and are commonly transmitted to the genitals (causing genital herpes) through oral-to-genital sex. Up to 40% of genital herpes is caused by HSV-1.

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**MYTH** *Herpes can only affect the genital area.*

**FACT** HSV-1 typically affects the face (particularly the mouth or nose). Both HSV-1 and HSV-2 can affect the genitals, pubic area, buttocks, back of thigh or inner thigh. Herpes can also occur on other parts of the body, although this is less common. On the fingers it is known as herpes whitlow.

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**MYTH** *People always know if they have genital herpes.*

**FACT** 80% of those with genital herpes do not know they have it. They may have no symptoms or have very mild symptoms..

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**MYTH** *People with herpes are always infectious.*

**FACT** Most of the time, when a person with herpes doesn't have symptoms they are not infectious. However, the virus is occasionally shed from the skin when symptoms are not present.

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**MYTH** *When you have an STI check or a cervical smear, it always checks for herpes.*

**FACT** Routine sexual health (STI screens) checks and cervical smear tests do not screen or test for herpes. Accurate testing for herpes can only be done if a person has symptoms and a swab is taken directly from the lesion.

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**MYTH** *People with herpes cannot have children.*

**FACT** Herpes does not affect fertility, and pregnant people with genital herpes can have normal pregnancies and vaginal delivery. Herpes can be passed on to babies, but this is rare. If you are pregnant and you or your partner have herpes, talk to your health care professional for more information.

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**MYTH** *Herpes causes cervical cancer.*

**FACT** Herpes is not associated with cervical abnormalities or cervical cancer. These are caused by HPV (human papillomavirus).

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**MYTH** *Herpes is passed through blood.*

**FACT** Herpes is not present in the blood. People with genital herpes can still donate blood. Genital herpes is only passed through direct skin-to-skin contact, both orally and genitally.

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**MYTH** *If you have herpes you should always wear condoms, even in long-term monogamous relationships.*

**FACT** In long-term relationships, most couples choose not to continually use condoms, and understand that getting herpes is just a part of life. (Your partner may already have herpes without being aware of it). Whilst some people may experience troublesome symptoms from time to time, for the majority of people with herpes it is not symptomatic or causes only mild symptoms. Medication is available for those that need it for effective symptom management.

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**MYTH** *People who have genital herpes can't receive oral sex.*

**FACT** When a person does not have a herpes outbreak or symptoms of genital herpes, it is generally safe to receive oral sex. Herpes transmission to the mouth from the genitals is rare.

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**MYTH** *People with herpes can never have sex again without transmitting it.*

**FACT** Herpes does not define you, or your sex life. Having herpes means being aware and taking precautions during flare up/recurrences (avoiding sexual contact during this time). The risk of transmission outside of a flare up/recurrence is low. You can still enjoy a normal sex life.

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**MYTH** *If someone in my house has herpes, I might get it.*

**FACT** The herpes simplex virus (HSV) is not spread through sharing communal facilities. When the virus leaves living skin cells, it dies. People with genital or facial herpes are able to use the same showers, toilets, washing machines and swimming pools as anyone else, with no risk of passing on the infection.

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## Winning the war in your mind.

The emotional impact of being diagnosed with genital herpes is often more significant than the physical symptoms. It is therefore valuable to have all the facts about herpes.

## Sexually Transmitted Infections Education Foundation

Copies of this pamphlet are available from:

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Helpline email: **info@stief.org.nz**



**View our sexual health website for rangatahi, including a  
national database of sexual health providers:**

**[justthefacts.co.nz](http://justthefacts.co.nz)**

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