

STIEF 

Herpes Simplex

Myths vs Facts



**THE NEW ZEALAND
HERPES FOUNDATION**

Herpes Myths vs Facts

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

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.

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

FACT Herpes is very common and is 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 with herpes have no symptoms and therefore 75% of people who acquire herpes get it from a partner who is unaware they have herpes.

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. Approximately 50% of genital herpes is caused by HSV-1.

MYTH *Herpes only affects the genital area.*

FACT While HSV-2 most often affects the genitals, herpes can appear on many parts of the body. HSV-1 typically causes cold sores around the mouth or nose. Both HSV-1 and HSV-2 can infect the genitals, buttocks, pubic area, and thighs. In rarer cases, herpes can occur on the fingers (called herpes whitlow) or other areas of the body.

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.

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.

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

FACT Routine sexual health (STI screens) 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.

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.

MYTH *Herpes causes cervical cancer.*

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

MYTH *Herpes is passed through blood.*

FACT Herpes is not present in the blood. People with genital herpes can donate blood. Genital herpes is only passed through direct skin-to-skin contact.

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.

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.

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

FACT You can still enjoy a normal 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 and taking daily medication can reduce this risk to almost nothing.

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

FACT The herpes simplex virus 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.

MYTH *If you get herpes there is no treatment.*

FACT Medication is available for those that need it for effective symptom management and reducing the chance of transmission.

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.

For more information check out The Facts booklet, available at herpes.org.nz.

Sexually Transmitted Infections Education Foundation

Copies of this pamphlet are available from:

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

justthefacts.co.nz

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