The most serious complication of genital herpes is infection of a baby during delivery. Although this is not common, infection in the newborn can be extremely serious and even fatal. A pregnant woman who has a history of genital herpes should tell her doctor. In certain cases a Caesarian section delivery may be recommended to prevent infection in the child.

DIAGNOSIS

If you think you have been exposed or show signs of herpes infection, see your health care provider. Prompt professional diagnosis may increase your chances of responding to a prescription medication like acyclovir that reduces the duration and severity of an initial bout of symptoms. A professional diagnosis can also help to avoid confusion with other diseases that have similar symptoms. Once you have a diagnosis, alert your sexual contacts, and seek the treatment and information you need to deal with genital herpes in your daily life.

TREATMENT

Doctors can treat the symptoms of genital herpes, but as yet there is no drug that will actually eradicate the virus. However, there are a few antiviral medications that can be given to speed up healing and reduce the severity of the genital sores.

Antiviral medications are most effective when given during the first episode of genital sores. They have little, if any, effect during recurrent episodes. Use of antiviral medications during an initial episode of genital herpes will have no effect on the subsequent risk of recurrences.

Daily suppressive therapy with an antiviral drug like Acyclovir, Famcyclovir or Valaclovir may reduce the frequency of recurrences and is indicated for some patients.

You will be advised to not have vaginal, oral or anal sex while the sores are present, and to be extremely careful with personal hygiene. Loose-fitting clothing should be worn until the sores begin to heal, and the area around the sex organs should be kept clean and dry.

PREVENTION

The only way to prevent genital herpes is to avoid being exposed to the virus. Both male and female condoms are likely to reduce the likelihood of transmission. However, since condoms may not cover all the areas where a herpes sore may appear, they may not provide full protection. Dental dams or similar latex barriers may help reduce transmission during oral sex. It is best to avoid sexual contact while symptoms are present in your genital or mouth areas or that of your sexual partner.

As with other STDs, your sexual habits and patterns determine the likelihood of being exposed and infected. The more frequently a person engages in sexual relations with different people, the greater the risk of acquiring genital herpes or another STD. Limiting the number of sexual partners will greatly improve your chances of avoiding genital herpes.

Research is currently underway to develop a vaccine that protects against genital herpes.
The herpes virus remains in the body and becomes inactive after the sores have healed. While in the inactive stage, the herpes virus can remain in nerve tissue for long periods of time without causing any symptoms. This is true of both oral (cold sores) and genital forms of herpes.

There is a significant risk of infection in a newborn child born to a mother with active genital herpes infection (i.e., the presence of sores in the genital area). The risk is greatest during delivery for women who have their first episode of genital herpes sores. Infection in the newborn may cause brain damage or death. In most cases, the baby becomes infected while passing through the birth canal. However, in rare cases, the baby can become infected while still in the womb.

A prodrome may occur anywhere from a few hours to several days before sores appear, providing an indication that all sexual activity should stop.

CAUSES OF RECURRENT ATTACKS

Just as with cold sores, no one knows exactly what causes genital herpes to reactivate. A number of physical and emotional factors can trigger a relapse: stress, fatigue, the menstrual cycle, fever or sunburn, for example. Maintaining good health by proper nutrition, rest, and exercise can help to control recurrent genital herpes attacks. So can efforts to deal with and reduce emotional stress. Most people learn to manage their infections while leading a normal lifestyle.

The vast majority of genital herpes attacks simply consist of painful blisters that heal by themselves and cause no serious medical problems. Because herpes sores are breaks in the skin, they increase the possibility of other kinds of infections entering the body. To prevent this, extra care should be taken to keep the affected areas clean. Similarly, careful hand washing ought to be practiced to prevent the virus from spreading to other parts of the body, especially the eyes and mouth.