

Genital herpes, patient instructions

- Genital herpes is caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV).
- There are two types of herpes simplex viruses: Herpes simplex virus 2 is the most common cause of genital herpes, while herpes simplex virus 1 most commonly causes common cold sores. However, both virus types can affect either the lips or genital areas.
- Symptoms, manner of infection and medication are the same regardless of the type of virus.
- Approximately 20% of Finns are infected with HSV-2, but only a small proportion of them are symptomatic.

Transmission

- The virus is transmitted through direct skin or mucous membrane contact through
 - vaginal and anal intercourse
 - oral sex
 - hands, when the hand touches an area of skin or mucous membranes with herpes blisters and then touches another area of skin or mucous membranes.
- Also, an asymptomatic person can infect others. Therefore, herpes can be transmitted even if the person does not have any symptoms.

Symptoms

- The first symptoms can occur within a week or so of infection or much later.
- An itching, tingling sensation and painful blisters appear in the genital area and quickly turn into sores. In addition, lymph nodes in the groin can become enlarged and tender. You can feel a burning sensation when urinating.
- In addition to the genitals, HSV infections are common in the anal area and on the buttocks.
- The initial infection usually involves general symptoms such as fever and headache. The initial symptoms disappear without treatment in 2 to 3 weeks. The initial infection can also involve an inflammation of the cervix or rectum.
- After infection, the herpes virus settles in a nerve ganglion and remains there permanently. It can reactivate later on, but the symptoms are usually milder and last for 2 to 7 days.

Examination and treatment

- Findings of genital herpes are often typical. Herpes infection can be diagnosed by taking a sample from a recent blister.

- In the case of an initial infection, other sexually transmitted diseases should also be excluded. You can book an appointment at the local health station.
- When there are no changes on the skin or mucous membranes, genital herpes cannot be reliably diagnosed.
- Antiviral medication relieves symptoms and shortens the duration of illness.
 - Acyclovir antiviral medicine is available at the pharmacy as non-prescription medicine. In the case of adults, the dose is 200 mg five times a day (approximately four hours apart) for five days. The medication should be started as early as possible.
 - You need a prescription from a doctor for antiviral medicine taken twice a day.
 - In the case of recurrent genital herpes, you should ask your doctor for a prescription in advance so that you can purchase the medicine and start taking it as soon as possible after the onset of symptoms.
 - Long-term use of prophylaxis can be considered in the case of frequently recurring, severe herpes.
- The herpes virus remains permanently in the body despite treatment.
- You must use a condom/dental dam when engaging in casual sex encounters to prevent transmission.
- Condoms and dental dams significantly reduce the transmission of herpes, but do not provide full protection.
- In a committed relationship, the partners can make a joint decision not to use condoms/dental dams.
- **At the maternity clinic** it is important to mention the genital herpes of both the future mother and the other parent. When arriving at the hospital to have a baby, the woman in labour should also inform the staff if she has had flare-ups of genital herpes during pregnancy.
 - A newborn baby can get the infection from the mother during childbirth. This manifests as a superficial blistering infection, central nervous system infection or disseminated multi-organ infection. The risk of infection is less than 5% in the case of recurrent herpes, but clearly higher in the case of the mother's initial infection.
 - It is important to inform the maternity clinic staff about a genital herpes infection in order to consider medication and the mode of delivery.
 - Herpes medication can also be used during pregnancy.
 - If herpes blisters appear for the first time during pregnancy and there are also general symptoms, such as fever and headache, the emergency services of the health station or maternity hospital must be contacted (link to the HUS website: <https://www.hus.fi/en/patient/treatments-and-examinations/emergency-services-during-pregnancy-and-labor>) or the Medical Helpline, 116117 must be called in order to receive further instructions. In case of recurrent infections, medication



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can be obtained from the local health station, if necessary. Prophylaxis medicine is prescribed at the maternity and child health clinic, if necessary.