

Herpes

Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV) causes a variety of illnesses:

- There are two common types: HSV1 and HSV2
- Newborn infection – this is a serious infection and may be life-threatening, usually HSV2 (not discussed in this handout)
- Genital infection – this is the most common form of herpes in adults, usually HSV2. (not discussed in this handout)
- **Oral infection or Gingivostomatitis** – this is the most common form of herpes in children beyond the newborn period and adolescents, usually HSV1

Oral Herpes or Gingivostomatitis

- May cause little or no symptoms, or may cause marked pain and fever
- Occurs from direct contact with infected oral secretions or sores
- Incubation period is 2 days to 2 weeks
- May cause an illness with:
 - Fever
 - Crankiness or irritability
 - Swollen glands in the neck
 - Ulcers on the gums and mucus membranes of the mouth
 - Blisters on the skin around the mouth
 - Viruses are usually shed for about a week

Herpes may infect the **skin** anywhere on the body, and persons with oral herpes may inoculate themselves through their saliva to other body areas

- The fingers, also known as “herpetic whitlow”
- The eyes
- Other skin areas
- People with eczema are at risk for more wide-spread herpes skin infection called “eczema herpeticum”

Patches of skin infected with herpes are contagious by contact and may spread among athletes with skin-to-skin contact. This is known as “herpes gladiatorum” among wrestlers or “herpes rugbiaforum” among rugby players.

Diagnosis

- Herpes infection is often diagnosed by symptoms and physical examination
- Swabs of blister fluid may be cultured for the herpes virus
- Blood tests may confirm infection, but may not be positive until later during infection

Contagiousness

Contact precautions (avoid contact with saliva or sores, strict handwashing, no shared towels or linens, no shared cups or utensils, no kissing) are necessary to prevent spread of the infection.

- Especially avoid contact with newborns (first four weeks of life)
- Especially avoid contact with persons who have weak immune systems
- Especially avoid contact with persons with moderate or severe eczema
- Childcare or school:
 - Children with oral herpes infection who do not have control of their saliva must be excluded from childcare or school.
 - Children with infection limited to the skin may attend childcare or school if the area is covered with clothing or a dressing.
 - Children with recurrent herpes (described below) are not excluded from childcare or school.
 - Athletes may require special precautions.

Treatment

Oral herpes infection is self-limited, that is, heals on its own.

- Anti-viral drugs are available for treating certain herpes infections
 - These drugs are especially important for newborns or infection that has spread to organs
 - These drugs are especially important for persons with compromised immune systems
 - These drugs are often used for genital herpes
- Anti-viral drugs have limited usefulness for children with oral herpes infection
- Pain or fever are treated with acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin)
- Soothing fluids to maintain hydration
- Children old enough to rinse and spit may use saltwater rinses

Reactivation of herpes infection

After herpes infection heals, the virus persists in the body for life. This is called “latent” infection. The virus remains dormant, living in sensory nerves.

- Reactivation of virus may have no symptoms or may cause blisters
- Pain, itch or tingling may occur as the virus re-activates, sometimes before the blisters are visible.
- The blister fluid from reactivated herpes contains infectious viruses and is contagious, usually for 3-4 days.
- Reactivation of herpes from gingivostomatitis causes a group of blisters, usually along the border of the lip. These are called “cold sores” or “fever blisters”.
 - Treatment for comfort:
 - Blistex or Abbreva are soothing but unlikely to heal sores any faster
 - An oral medication, valacyclovir, if started as soon as symptoms start, can reduce the time that blisters are present.
- Reactivation of herpes from infection in areas other than the mouth also occurs, with the blisters forming in the area connected to the nerve where the virus lives. This happens in genital herpes or any other site where herpes has infected.