NOTE TO COUNSELORS: When counseling participants about genital herpes, please refer to the virus as genital herpes and NOT as HSV to avoid confusion with HIV.

1. What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the herpes simplex virus. You may sometimes hear genital herpes referred to as HSV, which stands for herpes simplex virus. This should not be confused with HIV. Genital herpes is very common. One out of four adults has genital herpes. Most individuals have no or minimal signs/symptoms. When signs do occur, they may appear as one or more blisters on or around the genitals or rectum. The blisters break, leaving tender ulcers (sores) that may take two to four weeks to heal the first time they occur. For other people, outbreaks may not be as severe, and can be confused with yeast infections or “itchy” spots, bug bites, pimples, jock itch, allergies to soaps or clothes, or hemorrhoids. Typically, another outbreak can appear weeks or months after the first, but it is almost always less severe and shorter in duration than the first outbreak. Although the herpes virus stays in the body indefinitely, the number of outbreaks tends to decrease over a period of years. Finally, some people never experience a typical outbreak, and may remain without symptoms through their lifetime. There is no cure for herpes.

When people first hear that they are infected with genital herpes, many become upset. Some may feel ashamed or guilty because genital herpes can be transmitted from one person to another during sex. Such feelings are normal. But through knowing more about the infection, people with genital herpes can learn to cope with the disease and lead a healthy life.

2. How do people get genital herpes?

Genital herpes is spread by contact with the herpes-infected skin of one person to the skin of another person.

- If you have genital herpes and have sex, you can transfer the virus from your genitals to your partner’s genitals.
- If you have a cold sore on your lip and have oral sex (put your mouth on your partner’s genitals), you can transmit oral herpes to his or her genitals.
- If you have genital herpes and your partner puts his or her mouth on your genitals (oral sex), you can transmit genital herpes to his/her mouth.
- If a woman has genital herpes during pregnancy, she can pass the virus to the child during delivery.

Some people may have genital herpes, but have no sores. Genital herpes can still be spread even though there are no sores; in fact, this is the major mode of transmission. Using condoms reduces the likelihood of spread of genital herpes, but it does not eliminate it.
3. What are the signs of genital herpes?

Often when a person first gets infected, he/she feels sick for a few days. The sickness may be like the flu, with fever, headache, and body aches. Some people get very sick, and others may not be ill enough to see a doctor.

Signs and symptoms of a genital herpes outbreak may include (see Appendix I for illustrations):

- Blisters or sores appear on or near the genitals.
- Burning during urination
- The sores can also be anywhere in the genital area or buttocks. Sometimes they are on the legs or back
- Sores are sometimes around the anus (even in people who do not have anal sex)
- Itching in the labia area (for women), scrotum (men) or peri-anal area (women or men)

All genital herpes sores, and especially blisters, are filled with the herpes virus and so an outbreak is the most dangerous time for passing the infection to others. It is important to recognize the symptoms and always use a condom.

4. How do people without genital sores transmit herpes?

Sometimes people have active herpes virus on their genital skin, but no sores are present. This is called subclinical shedding. Subclinical shedding occurs when the active herpes virus moves down the nerves into the genital skin, but causes no sores. This is the main way that herpes is transmitted, since the infected person typically doesn’t realize that they are shedding the herpes virus in the absence of sores.

Because people with genital herpes can infect sex partners when there are no sores or obvious symptoms, it is important to protect one’s sex partner by always using condoms. Using condoms reduces the likelihood of spread of genital herpes, but it does not eliminate it.

5. How is genital herpes diagnosed?

The signs and symptoms associated with genital herpes can vary greatly. The most common way genital herpes is diagnosed is by doing a visual inspection of the genital area to determine if genital sores typical of herpes are present in the genital area.

Although not as common, another way to diagnose genital herpes is to take a sample from the sore (if sores are present) and test it in a laboratory to see if the virus is present.

Genital herpes infections can be diagnosed between outbreaks by the use of a blood test. Blood tests, which detect antibodies to the herpes infection, can be helpful, but are not available in many parts of the world. They also do not tell when a person actually got infected with the herpes virus; if antibody is present, infection could have occurred anytime in the person’s past.
6. **If I tested positive for genital herpes, what treatment is available?**

Once someone is infected with herpes, the virus stays in the body for life. There is no treatment that can cure herpes, but antiviral medications can shorten and prevent outbreaks during the period of time the person takes the medication. In addition, daily suppressive therapy can prevent outbreaks and also reduce transmission of herpes to sexual partners. (Note: The antiviral medications used for genital herpes are different from the antiretroviral medications used to treat HIV).

When taken for outbreaks, these drugs can reduce:
- Length of the outbreak
- Pain caused by the outbreak

Pain from symptoms such as burning when urinating can be relieved in several ways:
- Taking additional pain medicine that has been prescribed by a medical provider
- Relaxing in warm baths
- Wearing loose, comfortable clothing

If you tested positive for genital herpes, the clinic staff will provide you with information about medication and provide treatment/referral to available resources where you can get treatment. The study staff will also discuss with you ways to prevent transmission of genital herpes to your sexual partner and, if you are pregnant or planning to get pregnant, your unborn baby.

7. **If I tested positive for genital herpes, how can I identify the warning signs of an outbreak?**

There are some warning signs that may occur before a herpes outbreak. It is important to identify these signs and take precautions, such as taking medications and take precautions if having sex when these signs occur.

Some warning signs include:
- Itching, pain, or burning in the genital skin or anus
- Irritation or “tingling” in the nerves in the buttocks, low back, or legs
- Red patches in the genital area

It is important to know that some people have no warning signs and feel no pain before an outbreak. Also, not all warning signs are followed by sores.

8. **I have never experienced an outbreak, why did I test positive?**

Not everyone with genital herpes experiences the same symptoms. Genital herpes signs may look slightly different in each person; therefore it can be hard to recognize. Most people infected with genital herpes are not aware of their infection. Most people with genital herpes infection never have sores, or they have very mild signs/symptoms that they do not recognize.
as being caused by genital herpes. Sometimes herpes sores may look like bug bites, pimples, jock itch, allergies to soaps or clothes, or hemorrhoids. Women who have herpes may think that they have frequent yeast infections, and sometimes herpes sores are not painful.

9. If I tested positive for genital herpes, how can I prevent transmitting the virus to my sexual partner(s)?

Herpes can only be spread through skin-to-skin contact, most commonly through sex (vaginal, anal, or oral). It is important to know that even if a person does not have any signs/symptoms he or she can still infect sex partners. It is important to inform your sexual partner(s) if you are infected with genital herpes; if possible, try not to have sex when you have warning signs or sores; and always use condoms when having sex since condoms reduce the risk of infection.

10. If I tested positive for genital herpes, how can I prevent transmitting the virus to my unborn child?

Genital herpes may infect a newborn baby if the baby passes through the birth canal when the virus is present. During pregnancy you should tell your medical provider if you or your partner has genital herpes.

Women who have genital herpes or whose sex partner has genital or oral herpes should be examined carefully for the presence of herpes sores when in labor. If a baby is infected with herpes, she/he can become very sick and die. The herpes virus can get into the baby’s brain and cause brain damage. For this reason, it is very important to have good prenatal care.

11. Who do I contact if I have any additional questions?

If you have any questions about this information or would like to receive more information, treatment and referrals, please contact [site to provide contact information, not only site-specific contact information, but also local resources/providers in the area. Sites can obtain more information on the following website: http://www.ashastd.org/std-sti/Herpes.html].
Appendix I: Signs of Genital Herpes

- Swollen vaginal lips
- Blisters on penis
- Sores on buttocks near vaginal lips
- Sore on penis
- Sore on vaginal lips
- Sore on thigh
- Sore near anus
- Blister between buttock cheeks
- Mild superficial vaginal ulcer