

# MANAGING HERPES

LIVING AND LOVING  
WITH HSV



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# CONTENTS



PREFACE	XI
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	XIII
1 THE NEWS	1
2 A VIRUS IS A VIRUS IS A VIRUS?	5
HERPESVIRUSES: THE FAMILY TREE	6
HERPES SIMPLEX VIRUS (HSV)	8
THE BOTTOM LINE	13
3 THE STI YOU DIDN'T KNOW YOU HAD?	15
4 THE FIRST EPISODE: HSV'S INITIAL IMPACT	23
THE IMMUNE RESPONSE	24
FIRST-EPISODE SYMPTOMS	25
THE EMOTIONAL SIDE	28
WHAT YOU CAN DO	29
5 RECURRENT GENITAL HERPES: THE LONG RUN	33
LATENCY	34
REACTIVATION	35
RECURRENCES WITH SYMPTOMS	36
REACTIVATION WITHOUT SYMPTOMS	47
WHAT TRIGGERS RECURRENCES	51
THE BOTTOM LINE	53

6	HOW IS HERPES SPREAD?	55
	WHEN SYMPTOMS ARE PRESENT	56
	WHEN NO SYMPTOMS ARE PRESENT	60
	OTHER ISSUES FOR TRANSMISSION OF HSV	62
7	WHO'S TO BLAME?	67
8	PATIENT AND PROVIDER	73
9	TREATMENT OPTIONS	81
	EPISODIC THERAPY	85
	SUPPRESSIVE THERAPY	87
	SAFETY CONCERNS	92
	HIV AND IMMUNE-SUPPRESSED PATIENTS	94
	COMPARISON SHOPPING	96
	CONSIDERING TREATMENT FOR YOURSELF	98
10	TOPICAL THERAPY AND ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES	101
	COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE MEDICINES	105
11	SORTING OUT THE EMOTIONAL ISSUES	111
	HERPES AND SELF-IMAGE	112
	SOCIAL STIGMA?	113
	TALKING ABOUT HERPES	115
	HERPES AND SEXUAL HEALTH	117
	EMOTIONS AND ADJUSTMENT	119
	MOVING FORWARD	119
12	TELLING A PARTNER	121
	MAKING THE CHOICE	122
	STARTING WITH YOURSELF	124
	PREPARING TO TELL: WHEN AND HOW	124

## CONTENTS

WHAT TO SAY	126
13 HERPES AND YOUR SEX LIFE	131
THE BASICS	132
RISK REDUCTION FOR GAYS AND LESBIANS	138
SELF-IMAGE AND SEXUAL GROWTH	140
THINKING THROUGH THE ISSUES: TESTING, RISKS AND CHOICES	143
USING CONDOMS	147
14 HERPES AND PREGNANCY	151
HOW HSV CAN SPREAD TO NEWBORNS	152
ASSESSING THE RISK	152
PREVENTION: WOMEN WITH RECURRENT HERPES	154
PREVENTION: MEN WITH RECURRENT HERPES	158
WHEN NEWBORNS GET HERPES	159
PROTECTING THE BABY AT HOME	161
NEONATAL HERPES AND ADVOCACY	161
WHAT YOU CAN DO	162
15 THE BROADER SPECTRUM OF HSV INFECTION	165
HERPETIC WHITLOW	166
OCULAR HERPES	167
HSV INFECTIONS OF THE NERVOUS SYSTEM	168
DISSEMINATED HSV INFECTION AND HSV INFECTION IN THE IMMUNOCOMPROMISED	169
HSV INFECTION AND BLOOD DONATION	171
THE BOTTOM LINE	172
16 DIAGNOSTIC TESTS	173
VIRAL CULTURE	174
PCR TESTING	175

TYPE 1 OR TYPE 2?	176
TYPE-SPECIFIC SEROLOGY	176
DEBATE OVER USES FOR TYPE-SPECIFIC SEROLOGY	183
OTHER COMMON DIAGNOSTIC TOOLS	186
17 NEW RESEARCH, NEW HOPE	189
VACCINE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT	190
HSV SUBUNIT VACCINE: HERPEVAC	191
OTHER VACCINE APPROACHES	193
NOVEL THERAPEUTIC AGENTS	198
WHAT YOU CAN DO	200
18 OTHER SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS	201
AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION	207
HERPES AND OTHER STIs	208
WHAT YOU CAN DO	209
19 LEGAL ISSUES	211
CRIMINAL LAW AND INFECTIOUS DISEASES	212
CIVIL LAWS AND INFECTIOUS DISEASES	212
THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK	214
COMMON DEFENSES AND STRATEGIES	215
HERPES AND HEALTH INSURANCE	218
RESOURCE LIST	221
GLOSSARY	229
FURTHER READING	235
INDEX	247

## 1

## THE NEWS



*“I had been managing on my own as a single parent for nine years,” says Carolyn, “and I’d decided to pursue what I thought might be a promising relationship with a man I’d recently met. Several weeks later, there I was at the gynecologist’s office, hearing that I might have genital herpes. The doctor gave me some printed material and a prescription, and told me she would have lab results in about a week. At the pharmacy next door I was holding back tears, wanting to hide from everyone, somehow feeling they were all staring at me. When I got to my car, I drove straight home and read the material over and over, hoping to find I had something else.”*

For some, a diagnosis of genital herpes comes as a complete shock. They know next to nothing about herpes, and they perceive themselves to be at zero risk of sexually transmitted infections. For others, it’s not as big a surprise. They may have had a partner who had it or may know enough about its symptoms to make an educated guess. Many first learn they have herpes when they seek medical attention for some kind of symptom in the genital area, though they might not have suspected that herpes would be the explanation. For a few, a herpes diagnosis is the result of a blood test taken as part of a broader work-up for sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Whatever the circumstances, it's safe to say nobody *likes* getting diagnosed with genital herpes. Some may see it as a relatively minor issue—the inevitable price of being sexually active—yet still not good news. For others, it's a traumatic event, capable of causing a range of emotions.

One of the factors that gives herpes the potential to cause distress is the fact that it's a sexually transmitted infection. Growing up in American society, many of us come to view an STI like gonorrhea or syphilis—or, more recently, herpes—as something strange and horrible that happens only to those who have done something wrong. People who deserve trouble in their lives. People of bad morals. Attitudes about STIs vary depending on religion and a number of other cultural factors, but many of us have a hard time accepting the fact that we have an infection spread through having sex. It's often something about which we're taught to feel ashamed—or at least embarrassed.

Is this a reasonable attitude? Certainly few people would go out of their way to acquire an STI. Most of us would prefer to remain free of illnesses, whatever they might be. But the fact remains that all of us get sick during our lives. All of us are exposed to, and ultimately infected with, a host of bacteria and viruses that pose challenges to our health. Some of these germs are spread through the air or food or through contact with household objects that have been in some way contaminated. Some are spread through close physical contact with another person, including sexual contact.

Most of us are astonished to learn that infections spread through *sexual contact* are among the most widespread in our society. In fact, among infectious diseases only the common cold surpasses STIs in the number of people affected. According to the latest figures from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there

are more than 19 million new cases of sexually transmitted infections every year. *That's people 52,054, newly infected, every day—enough to fill Franklin Field in Philadelphia.*

When you think about it, the fact that STIs are so rampant shouldn't come as such a huge surprise. After all, people in all walks of life do have sex. It's as much a part of our biological make-up as eating and sleeping. And when we have sex, we sometimes pass a variety of common germs back and forth. One of the most common, it turns out, is herpes simplex virus (HSV), the cause of genital herpes. This particular infection is a fact of life for roughly 50 million people in the U.S.—something on the order of one in five persons over the age of 14. An increasing number of us understand how prevalent herpes is, but most, ironically, do not translate this information into a sense of personal risk. Despite what we know “on paper,” we tend to see herpes as something that will happen only to someone else.

It's normal to feel some embarrassment about getting any sexually transmitted infection, even to feel that this condition somehow separates you from your friends, or changes the way you will interact with them. But getting an STI is hardly a rare event. And as you can see, getting herpes puts you in rather large company.

All this is not to say that you don't have a right to your feelings if a herpes diagnosis has caused you distress. Herpes is for all of us an unwelcome guest, and one of the things about it that is so distressing is that it's probably a lifelong guest. Often the first questions we ask the doctor in that fateful office visit focus on getting rid of it. “What do we do about it? What drug can I take? What's the cure?”

The answer, as you probably know by now, is that medical science as yet has no cure for herpes. There are a number of medications that can help to control herpes, although none can wipe it out

entirely. Some people choose to rely on these to keep herpes under control, while others come to feel that they don't need any medicines. Researchers, of course, are still hard at work, and the search for new drugs continues. Several types of vaccines are also in development.

In the meantime, it's important to remember that, *with time*, most people find herpes is not the catastrophe it might seem to be at the start. The physical and emotional distress of herpes usually peaks early on, often in the first few months.

The experience of millions of people shows that herpes does not have to be—and usually isn't—a major, life-changing event. Depending on the circumstances, and the type of symptoms involved, it often does require a process of adjustment—in our view of ourselves, in our relationships, and sometimes in the way we approach our physical health and well-being. The first step is to gain a better understanding about herpes and the issues it might raise in our lives.

By opening this book, you've already taken that first step.