What is herpes? [1]

Dear Alice,

What is herpes?

Signed,
?????

Answer

Dear ??????,

Got some curiosities about herpes? The term herpes actually refers to a family of eight viruses that include oral herpes, genital herpes, herpes varicellus-zoster, etc. — it can be tricky to keep it all straight! Believe it or not, almost the entire human race has been infected with at least one strain of the herpes virus in their lives. Once you’ve been infected, it can lie dormant in your body between bouts of symptoms. Needless to say, the herpes family is a bit of a sore subject.

You’ll find that the Herpes [2] section in the Go Ask Alice! archives has a whole host of herpes-related Q&As, but here’s some key information about each of the eight members of the herpes family:

- **Herpes simplex type 1 (HSV-1 or HHV-1)** is typically the virus that causes oral herpes, but it can also spread to the genitals or the eyes. Symptoms of HSV-1 typically include cold sores (small, pimple-like sores) or fever blisters near the mouth. About 90 percent of adults across the globe show evidence of this strain of herpes. To decrease your chances of contracting or spreading HSV-1, it's wise to steer clear of kissing, oral sex, and sharing utensils with someone who has a visible cold sore or fever blister.

- **Herpes simplex type 2 (HSV-2 or HHV-2)** is the primary cause of genital herpes [3], one of the most common sexually transmitted infections (STIs). About one in six American adults has HSV-2, but some people may be asymptomatic and not yet know they have it. Spread via skin-to-skin contact during sexual activities, HSV-2 causes recurring flare-ups of open sores around the genitals. It’s most contagious during this period, but open sores don’t have to be present for transmission to occur. It can also be spread to the mouth or throat of someone performing oral sex. **Condoms** [4], dental dams, and other barrier methods can
reduce the chances of transmission as can avoiding sexual activities if visible sores are present.

- **Varicellus-zoster virus (or HHV-3)** is the strain responsible for those calamine lotion-filled memories of the chickenpox from childhood. After a person contracts chickenpox, usually as a child, the virus lies dormant and can be activated again later in life in the form of shingles. If you’ve never had the chickenpox and you didn’t get vaccinated, you may want to consider getting the chickenpox vaccine to protect yourself. It’s also worth noting that a shingles vaccine is available as well.

- **Epstein-Barr virus (or HHV-4)** is the strain that’s associated with a few different conditions, but most notably can lead to mononucleosis (often called mono), which involves fatigue, sore throat, fever, and swollen lymph nodes. In rare cases, this virus causes some cancers, such as Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Epstein-Barr is spread through saliva, so keeping your food, drinks, and lips to yourself when you’re around someone with this strain is recommended.

- **Cytomegalovirus (or HHV-5)** is a common strain of herpes that doesn’t cause symptoms in most healthy people. However, if a pregnant woman contracts cytomegalovirus (CMV), the baby can become very sick, with symptoms including jaundice, an enlarged spleen or liver, or pneumonia. For those who do exhibit symptoms of CMV, the experience of the virus is similar to that of mono.

- **Herpesvirus 6A, 6B, and 7 (or HHV-6A, HHV-6B and HHV-7)** are strains of the virus that are typically contracted in childhood and can cause a condition called roseola infantum, which is characterized by a fever and rash. HHV-6B is usually the cause of roseola, but it can occasionally result from the HHV-7 strain. There’s little known about the impact of HHV-7 — most adults test positive for it, but it’s primarily asymptomatic outside of childhood.

- **Kaposi sarcoma-associated herpesvirus (or HHV-8)** is a strain of the virus that can lead to cancer in some cases, causing purplish tumors to form on the skin and mucous membranes. The vast majority of people infected with this strain of herpes won’t develop cancer. However, Kaposi sarcoma is more common among those with compromised immune systems, such as those with HIV/AIDS.

While there’s currently no cure for herpes, there are ways to treat the symptoms. If you’re concerned that you may have been exposed to herpes or are experiencing symptoms, it might be helpful to talk with your health care provider. Depending on the strain, you can also look into getting vaccinated. While there are vaccinations available for the chickenpox and shingles, researchers are working on a vaccine for HSV-2 — the one that causes most cases of genital herpes. Further, even if you’re asking simply from curiosity, being aware of prevention methods is key. To minimize your risk of being infected by or transmitting any of the herpes viruses, consider reading History lesson: how do I ask about my partner’s past? in the Go Ask Alice! archives for ideas on talking with your partner about getting tested. Finally, feel free to explore the many other herpes-related musings in the archives.

Alice!

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