

Herpes increases risk of getting HIV? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

If you have the herpes virus are you more susceptible to AIDS?

Answer

Dear Reader,

In a word, possibly. Many studies show that the risk of contracting HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) does increase for people who have genital herpes; in fact, it's estimated that having herpes makes a person two to four times more susceptible to HIV infection, IF that person is exposed to HIV. (It may sound obvious, but it's important to remember that if a person is *not* exposed to HIV, then they have no risk of getting HIV, even if they have herpes.)

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) that cause open sores on the genitals, like herpes, syphilis, or chancroid, can increase HIV transmission. This is because the open sores make it easier for the HIV virus to get into the body. Also, when you have an infection your immune system kicks up a notch, producing disease-fighting cells called macrophages. The HIV virus can bind to these macrophages in mucus membranes like the vagina or anus and thus cross these membranes into the blood stream. If you have an infection in your genital area, macrophages are especially concentrated there, giving HIV more opportunities to enter your body.

People who have both herpes and HIV infections are also more likely to transmit HIV to their partners. Replication or activity of the herpes virus in the body appears to increase HIV viral loads (that is, increase the presence of HIV in blood and and sexual fluids). In addition, because of HIV's compromising effects on the immune system, it can cause more severe or longer-lasting herpes outbreaks. This can lead to increased transmission of HIV because transmission is more likely during herpes outbreaks. Treating both herpes and HIV may reduce the risk of transmission of both infections.

To help prevent HIV transmission, sexually active people (with and without herpes) have a few options to consider:

- Using condoms during vaginal, anal, and oral sex,

- Abstaining from sex during herpes outbreaks (which can help prevent both HIV and herpes transmission),
- Getting tested regularly for HIV and other STIs, and encouraging partner(s) to also get tested and treated if necessary,
- Limiting the number of sex partners and talking with partners about any past or current infections.

While there are not cures for HIV or herpes, both infections can be treated. If you think you might have been exposed, it's a good idea to make an appointment to get tested; You can make an appointment with your primary health provider, or visit a health center such as [Planned Parenthood](#) [2] which offers HIV and STI testing and treatment.

Treating herpes and/or HIV may help reduce the possibility of transmitting either virus to another person, and can also help a person with either type of infection stay healthy.

Take care,

Alice!

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