

What is herpes? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

What is herpes?

Signed,
?????

Answer

Dear ?????,

Got some worries about herpes? Oral herpes, genital herpes, herpes varicellus-zoster — it can be tricky to keep it all straight! The term “herpes” actually refers to a family of viruses, and there are eight members. 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 gotten one of the strains, it can lie dormant in your body between bouts of symptoms. Needless to say, the Herpes Family is like the nuisance neighbor on the block... but for the whole world.

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 are the essentials 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 (for example, during oral sex) or the eyes. Symptoms of HSV-1 typically include cold sores (small, pimple-like sores) or fever blisters near your mouth. The majority of people with HSV-1 contracted it during childhood, and about eight out of every ten adults are thought to have HSV-1. To decrease your chances of contracting or spreading HSV-1, 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 do not 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](#) [5], 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](#) [6] from childhood. After a person contracts chickenpox, usually as a child, the virus lies dormant and can be activated again later in life. This is called shingles, which can be serious if untreated. If you've never had the chickenpox and you didn't get vaccinated as a child, consider getting the chickenpox vaccine to protect yourself.
- **Epstein-Barr virus (or, HHV-4)** is the strain that causes a few different conditions, but most notably can lead to mononucleosis ("mono"), which involves fatigue, sore throat, fever, and swollen lymph nodes. Ninety percent of adults have evidence of Epstein-Barr in their bodies. In rare cases, this virus can cause some cancers, such as [Hodgkin's lymphoma](#) [7]. Epstein-Barr is spread through saliva, so keeping your food, drinks, and lips to yourself when you're around someone with this strain is likely a smart move.
- **Cytomegalovirus (or, HHV-5)** is a common strain of herpes that doesn't cause any symptoms in most healthy people. However, if a pregnant woman contracts [cytomegalovirus](#) [8], the baby can become very sick, with symptoms including jaundice, an enlarged spleen or liver, or pneumonia. Those with compromised immune systems can experience symptoms similar to mono if they are exposed to this strain, which can sometimes lead to serious complications.
- **Herpesvirus 6 and 7 (or, HHV-6 and HHV-7)** are strains of the virus that are typically contracted in childhood and can cause a condition that nearly all children experience called [roseola infantum](#) [9], characterized by a fever and rash.
- **Kaposi's 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 will not develop cancer, but [Kaposi's sarcoma](#) [10] is more common in those with compromised immune systems, such as those with AIDS.

While there is no cure for herpes currently, many types of treatments exist. A health care provider can be a good resource for finding a medication to alleviate particular symptoms. You can also look into getting vaccinated for the chickenpox or shingles strains, which are widely available. Although vaccines for the other types don't yet exist, researchers are currently working on a vaccine for HSV-2 — the one that causes most cases of genital herpes. Because all the forms of herpes are so easily transmitted, consider reading [How to ask you honey if they have any infections](#) [11] for ideas on how to find out if a partner has herpes before herpes finds you. Finally, feel free to explore the many other herpes-related musings in the related questions.

Alice!

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