Genital Infections and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)

There are a number of disease-causing germs that can be spread during sex. In people with damaged immune systems, these germs can cause serious problems and often require treatment.

Genital Herpes

What is it?

Genital herpes is an infection caused by the herpes simplex virus or HSV. There are two types of HSV, and both can cause genital herpes. HSV type 1 most commonly infects the lips causing sores known as fever blisters or cold sores, but it can also infect the genital area and produce sores there. HSV type 2 is the usual cause of genital herpes, but it can also infect the mouth during oral sex. A person who has genital herpes infection can easily pass or transmit the virus to an uninfected person during sex.

Both HSV 1 and 2 can produce sores (also called lesions) in and around the vaginal area, on the penis, around the anal opening, and on the buttocks or thighs. Occasionally, sores also appear on other parts of the body where the virus has entered through broken skin.

HSV remains in certain nerve cells of the body for life, and can frequently produce painful symptoms on and off in people with damaged immune systems.

If a woman has her first episode of genital herpes while she is pregnant, she can pass the virus to her unborn child and may deliver a premature baby. Half of the babies infected with herpes either die or suffer from damage to their nerves. A baby born with herpes can develop serious problems that may affect the brain, the skin or the eyes. If babies born with herpes are treated immediately with acyclovir, their chances of being healthy are increased. Therefore, if you are pregnant and infected with genital herpes, you should consult your doctor before, during, and after your baby is born.

How is genital herpes treated?

Although there is no cure for genital herpes, your doctor can prescribe one of three medicines to treat it (all three drugs are recommended in the HIV/AIDS Policy Guide):

Acyclovir: This drug is taken either 5 times a day (using 200 mg tablets) or 3 times a day (using 400 mg tablets) for 7 to 10 days.

Famciclovir: This drug is taken 3 times a day for 7 to 10 days.

Valacyclovir: This drug is taken twice a day for 7 to 10 days.

During an active herpes episode, whether the first episode or a repeat one, you should follow a few simple steps to speed up healing and avoid spreading the infection to other places on the body or to other people:

- Keep the infected area clean and dry to prevent other infections from developing.
- Try to avoid touching the sores.
- Wash your hands after contact with the sores.