



PATHOLOGY TESTS EXPLAINED

Information about pathology tests to help everyone take control of their health and make the right decisions about their care.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT **YOUR TEST FOR HERPES**

Herpes is a common infection that is caused by the herpes simplex virus. There are two types:

- HSV-1 usually causes sores around the lips and mouth. It can also spread to the genital area through oral sex.
- HSV-2 infects the genital area where it causes blisters around the vagina, on the penis, around the anus, or on the buttocks or thighs.



Herpes infection



What to expect if you have herpes

Herpes is rarely a serious health risk. At the time of the first infection, it is not uncommon to experience a few days of fever, headache, or tiredness. Blisters and sores can appear at the site of infection within two weeks, typically in five to seven days, after the virus is transmitted and these usually heal within two to four weeks.

After the first time you are infected, the virus goes into an inactive state. It may cause outbreaks of blisters from time to time that last for about a week and then disappear. Recurrent episodes are usually much less severe than the first outbreak. The frequency and severity of recurrent episodes varies from person to person.

The herpes simplex virus is transmitted through direct contact, which include all types of skin-to-skin contact.

Throughout the world, genital herpes infections are the most common cause of genital ulcers. Genital herpes is not a reportable disease in Australia and so the rates are not accurately known. However, it is estimated that up to 60 per cent of people do not know they are infected because they either don't have any symptoms or else their symptoms are mild. Most people contract genital herpes from someone who did not know they were infected.



Testing

A swab or scraping is taken from a blister or sore in the mouth or genital area. The sample is sent to the laboratory where a genetic test is used to detect the DNA of the herpes virus. Occasionally, blood or spinal fluid can be collected if the infection has spread.



What your results can show?

A positive swab indicates active herpes, either HSV-1 or HSV-2. A genetic test can differentiate between the virus types and can show if you have either or both of the herpes viruses.

For genital herpes, the most common treatment is valacyclovir in tablet form. Cold sores are usually treated with topical therapies. Eye infections can be treated with drugs or topical therapies. For babies or immunosuppressed people such as those who have an underlying health condition, are elderly or being treated for cancer, the therapy of choice is often intravenous acyclovir.

All anti-herpes medications work by interfering with the copying of viral DNA which stops the virus reproducing. Treatments do not cure the herpes infection, but they can shorten the duration of and reduce the severity of outbreaks. Long-term suppressive oral therapy can reduce the frequency of outbreaks.



Having a medical test

The choice of tests your doctor makes will be based on your medical history and symptoms. Make sure you tell them everything you think might help. You play a central role in making sure your test results are accurate. Do everything you can to make sure the information you provide is correct and follow instructions closely. Talk to your doctor about any medication you are taking. Find out if you need to fast or stop any particular foods or supplements. These may affect your results.



Questions to ask your doctor

Why does this test need to be done?
Do I need to prepare (such as fast or avoid medications) for the sample collection?
Will an abnormal result mean I need further tests?
How could it change the course of my care?
What will happen next, after the test?

For more detailed information on these and many other tests go to pathologytestsexplained.org.au



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www.pathologytestsexplained.org.au

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Pathology Tests Explained is managed by a consortium of medical and scientific organisations representing pathology practice in Australia. More details at:
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