

LINE ON LIFE

1/30/85

Herpes, Herpes Everywhere — But It's Not What You Think

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

The **herpes virus** is a family of viruses, which causes at least four similar disorders:

- **Varicella** (chicken pox)
- **Herpes zoster** (shingles)
- **Herpes simplex I** (common cold sores and fever blisters)
- **Herpes simplex II** (a sexually transmitted disease or STD)

Thus the use of the term, "*herpes*," alone can be very confusing. Herpes comes from the Greek, "*herpein*," meaning "*to creep*," because of the appearance of skin rashes which develop into blisters. In all types of herpes, there is itching, burning or pain around the site of the blisters. Swollen lymph glands, headaches, fever and other flu-like symptoms are also common. These diseases have been with us for thousands of years, being described in some detail by ancient Greek and Roman healers.

Chicken pox is a common childhood disease, occurring in 80-90% of all children. It is most common at about 5-8 years of age. Barring any complications, this disease should run its course in a couple of weeks. Chicken pox rarely occurs in adults. If it does, the symptoms are generally more severe.

After a bout of chicken pox, you are essentially immune to re-infection. However, this does not mean that the virus is gone. Threatened by the immune systems developed in the body, the herpes virus seems to implant itself in the cell bodies of spinal nerves. It remains there in a dormant state.

Later — if the immune systems run down due to physical or psychological stress — that person may develop **shingles** (herpes zoster), a re-activation of the chicken pox. (It is extremely unlikely that an adult will get shingles from another person.)

With shingles, the painful rash and blisters usually occur horizontally around the body on one side or vertically on an arm or leg. There used to be an old myth that if the blisters completely encircled the body — if they "*met*" — the person would die. This is completely *false*.

Almost all of us (including me) have had **cold sores or fever blisters** (herpes simplex I). When the symptoms are present — from the preliminary itching to the healing scabs — physical contact with the diseased area can be infectious. Like chicken pox, the simplex I virus does not go away. It retreats to lie hidden in nerve cells until the next outbreak.

The sexually transmitted disease — **herpes simplex II** — has essentially the same symptoms as any herpes virus, except that it tends to be in the genital area. Painful genital blisters are usually accompanied by fever, headache, swollen lymph glands, muscle soreness and so on. In 1-3 weeks, the symptoms will disappear spontaneously. Like cold sores, herpes simplex II is contagious through intimate physical contact as long as any symptoms are present — from the initial tingling or itching through the healing of the sores.

Although the person recovers from the symptoms, the herpes virus has only retreated to spinal nerve cells. About two-thirds of those infected never experience another attack. The other third will have recurring attacks of the symptoms. However, the later attacks are less severe and disappear more quickly.

Herpes simplex I was typically "*above the waist*," and simplex II was below. Lately there has been an increase in "*crossovers*," possibly due to an increase in oral sexual activity.

**Common cold sores and herpes simplex II
are essentially the same,
except where the blisters
are located on the body.**

Because herpes simplex II usually occurs in the pelvic area, it has special significance for women. If an outbreak occurs during pregnancy, it can cause birth defects or a miscarriage. If it is evident during delivery, over half of the babies will die, unless a Cesarean section is done. Lastly, it has been linked statistically to cancer of the cervix.

Although these dangers are real, *public panic is unwarranted*. The scare stories about herpes simplex II in the mass media — combined with personal guilt and viewing herpes simplex II as divine punishment for misdeeds — cause strong emotional reactions. When this emotional response causes grade school administrators to suspend children with herpes (I or II), things are going too far.

If you need more information, contact your family physician, HELP (Herpetics Engaged in Living Productively), P.O. Box 100, Palo Alto, CA 94302 or go to Herpes.Org online.
