

northwest

Women and Herpes

The (sometimes) invisible menace

by Mary Christmas

“I never asked to get tested for herpes because I never had a reason to think that I had it,” says Gene, a 30-year-old Portland lesbian who developed the sexually transmitted disease last fall.

According to a handbook written by Terri Warren of Northwest Portland's Westover Heights Clinic, the most prevalent STD in the country is easy to catch, not diagnosed by most screenings and can be passed on by people who show no symptoms and who don't even realize they're infected.

The disease is herpes, and it could be that the lesbian community faces a higher risk of spreading it. There is a misconception among some women that herpes is harder to pass between female partners, which can lead to unsafe sex. But up to 60 percent of the adult population in the United States has herpes, and like in Gene's case, some of those people are infecting their partners with genital herpes through unprotected oral sex.

Herpes viruses account for several different, and unrelated, diseases including Epstein-Barr and shingles. Herpes simplex 1 (HSV 1) and herpes simplex 2 (HSV 2) can be spread between sex partners—and in ways that might surprise you. While people generally think of genital herpes (usually HSV 2) as the kind that is highly conta-

gious and causes multiple outbreaks of sores every year, HSV 1 is more often passed from one person to another. Type 1 has a familiar face: cold sores.

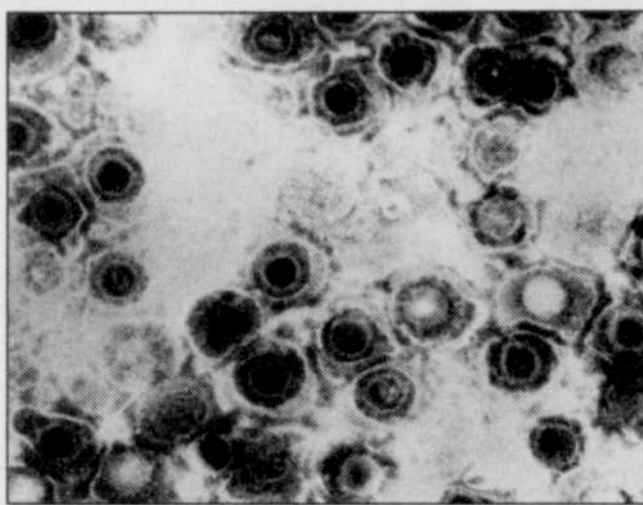
While education can help prevent transmission, sometimes awareness is not enough. For Gene, years of carefully avoiding infection might have delayed catching herpes but did not protect her in the end.

“There was a two-week period where I thought I had herpes, and I had safe sex for years unless I had a steady partner that I knew. But then I got more lax about it. I would just ask people if they'd ever had an outbreak,” she says.

Her girlfriend had never shown signs of having cold sores, so both were surprised when Gene got sick. When she asked her girlfriend about her status, “She said, ‘I don't have herpes’ but had never been tested. She has now, and she's a carrier.”

It is possible to contract oral herpes during childhood from a parent and to never experience an outbreak while still being a transmitter. Although Gene admits her first outbreak made her feel “total depression,” she hasn't blamed anyone in particular: “I haven't really been angry at [my girlfriend]. She had no idea that she had it.”

Why is there such ignorance about herpes, even



Cold sores are often the most obvious presentation of the herpes virus; carriers can pass the virus on for years without knowing they are infected.

among those infected with it? Lack of testing could be the culprit. Gene has no health insurance, only a limited emergency medical plan that doesn't cover preventative care. She says she will “usually go to free clinics for tests like this” but notes that the more expensive tests are not performed. At her last visit to Outside In, a sliding-scale clinic downtown, herpes was not one of the diseases included: “They tested for chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis and HIV.”

Wayne Centrone, medical outreach director for Outside In, confirms that herpes is not generally part of any clinic's basic test. “Because of the expense of screening for herpes, we just can't afford to do it for free.” He adds that if someone is concerned about their status, the test is available, but the patient must cover the cost.

While a blood test is the only way to know for sure if you are infected, some outdated tests can give insubstantial results because they don't differentiate between the two simplex viruses. Also, a false negative can occur, because it can take up to three months for the infected person to produce

antibodies to the virus. Savvy STD hunters should ask their doctor for a blood test that “types” which virus is present and should bring their partners in for the same treatment.

Spicing it up in the bedroom in new ways might be necessary for herpes-positive people, since the virus can be passed orally, genitally and even through touch. Those with herpes in one area can even infect themselves on another part of the body—a process known as “autoinoculation.” The risk level can be very frustrating, and dental dams alone are not enough to keep partners safe.

Testing is essential. Karen Sweigert of Cascade Women's Health recommends a test for anyone “who has changed partners in the last year or are planning on becoming pregnant.” She believes “herpes is not a life-threatening STD. It's very livable. But the first infection is nasty.”

MARY CHRISTMAS is a Portland free-lance writer and senior editor of \$pread Magazine: Illuminating the Sex Industry, online at www.spreadmagazine.org.



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