

Herpes Articles

by Jeannie May

Contents

I've Got a Secret	2
Dating and the H Bomb	6
Responsible Sex?	9
Australian Herpes Support Sites	12
About the Author	12

© 2003 Jeannie May

This eBook may be freely distributed, however, it is not to be sold or reproduced in any form under any circumstances without the written permission of the author.

See contact information page 12.

I've Got a Secret!

© 2003 Jeannie May

"I've got a secret! One that I don't want to share with anyone, even though I know that many people have the same thing. I have Herpes!"

"Yes, that's right, I'm one of the millions worldwide who share this very common virus. Unfortunately I don't have the 'OK' kind of Herpes - Cold Sores, but those nasty little blisters..... down there! And you know how I got them – from having sex. That makes me a bad girl, a nasty, promiscuous girl, who probably deserved to catch an STI from all that sleeping around. Right?"

"Wrong! I caught Genital Herpes from my husband. He doesn't even have any symptoms and he never knew he had it. He does remember having Cold Sores a few times when he was a teenager, but he had no idea that it was Herpes. It appears likely that he passed the virus to my genitals during oral sex."

Charleen, a 34 year old Office Manager from Sydney shares her secret at last. She says that she wishes that she had been better informed about Herpes, it may well have prevented her from contracting the virus so unwittingly. "It never occurred to me to ask him if he had ever suffered from Cold Sores, and anyway, I thought that you had to have an active sore in order to pass on the virus. When I read about asymptomatic shedding I felt ripped off! Why didn't I know about this?"

It's a common myth that Cold Sores are only 'catching' during an active outbreak, particularly when the lesions are open. However this is not the case. 'Asymptomatic shedding' can occur at any time without there being any visible symptoms of the virus present. A sobering thought indeed and most likely the very reason that this STI is at epidemic proportions throughout the world.

The 'secrecy' surrounding Herpes may be another factor contributing to the rising statistics. After all, who wants to sabotage a potential relationship by telling someone that you have an STI?

"It's hard enough to tell someone that you have Herpes, but it's even harder still to get the timing right! I always end up telling them too soon and they're like, hey, I wasn't even thinking of taking things that far yet! Or too late, after we've become close and then they feel betrayed because I didn't tell them sooner. Either way I lose, because they're outta here!" says Greg, a 23 year old uni student from Brisbane.

Some people choose not to tell their casual partners, preferring to rely on condoms and abstinence during outbreaks for protection. Chris, a 28 old year Graphic Designer from Melbourne says "I couldn't face telling someone, but 'not-telling' ruined my relationships anyway. My partners couldn't understand why sometimes I just didn't want to have sex, so none of my relationships ever lasted long. I know I should have been honest with them but I was just so afraid of blowing it!"

Most people are not naturally secretive, they want to talk about themselves, their hopes, their feelings and dreams. When they have problems or some anxiety in their life they want to share that too. Having a secret that you're afraid to share with your family and friends can place a great deal of emotional strain on a person.

"I just felt so alone," says Kathy, 23 year old Secretary from Sydney. "It wasn't something I felt I could talk about with my girlfriends. I usually discuss my boyfriend or work problems with them and they give me great advice and support, but this? I didn't want them thinking of me like that!"

Many people are afraid to discuss Herpes because of the negative social stigma attached to the virus. It's assumed that only promiscuous people and sex workers get STIs when this is simply not the case. Ordinary, everyday people do get STIs! In fact, everyone who is sexually active is at risk of contracting an STI.

"I probably should have been relieved to find out that it was only Herpes and not something far more serious," says Aidan, 28 year old Flight Attendant from Adelaide. "But I just couldn't get past the idea that it's incurable. I've got this for life!"

Having your worst fears confirmed by the doctor, being informed that you have an incurable STI can be emotionally devastating for some. Amanda, 24 year old Veterinarian's Assistant from Dubbo says "I totally fell apart when I first found out. I mean the physical pain was bad enough but knowing that there is no cure just blew me apart. I cried for days and days!"

Education and support are the two main keys to dealing with Herpes. Learning all you can about the virus, asking for leaflets from your doctor or sexual health clinic, checking the internet for more information and personally 'getting to know your Herpes' in order to recognise the symptoms which precede an outbreak can all be of enormous benefit.

Getting some kind of emotional support during those first few weeks is essential. Whether you talk to your medical practitioner, a professional counsellor, a friend, family member, a Herpes support group member, or even just joining an internet support group, having someone to talk to about your feelings can be so helpful.

Coming to terms with the fact that you have Herpes can take some time and the initial adjustment period can be emotionally traumatic, the important thing to remember is that you don't have to go through this alone. Amanda recommends joining an internet support group, especially if you are new to Herpes. "Getting on the net and finding so many support groups for Herpes sufferers was amazing! It made me realise just how many other people out there are having to deal with this too. My 'virtual' Herpes friends really helped me through a rocky period in my life. They shared their experiences and recommended that I try suppressive treatment."

Vicki, a 27 year old Marketing Assistant from Melbourne finally shared her secret with her best friend and says it was the best thing that she ever did. "When I was going through the emotional upheaval of my break-up with my boyfriend of two years my best friend was there for me. She was comforting me and giving me advice, telling me how he had been so wrong for me, etc. when I blurted out that she didn't know the half of it. Not only had he been a cheating louse, he had also given me Herpes!"

“Sarah was fantastic, she didn’t bat an eyelid when I said it, she just moved over to hug me. I had been so afraid of telling anyone, so afraid of losing my friend’s respect and of their not being able to understand how betrayed and humiliated I felt that I just kept all that pain inside me. Sharing my secret with Sarah was so cathartic! I can never thank her enough for being such a fabulous friend.”

The benefit of having emotional support from friends and family is inestimable, however that’s not always an option for everyone and that’s where support groups can be of great assistance. Rhonda, organiser of the Herpes in Brisbane Support Group says “Our group offers support, education, and great social activities. We advertise the group in the Courier Mail fortnightly and the local newspapers. Our support group phone number is on the ‘Facts Pack’ (many people reach us this way), plus we have a website where people can chat and message each other. We currently have around 180 online members.”

“We send out a quarterly print newsletter to members with new information and all our social activities for the following 3 months. In addition we also send out hundreds of newsletters to first time callers to our support phone line every year! We organise two monthly social activities - a Saturday evening of dinner, drinks and dancing at a pub or restaurant, and a Sunday lunch. We usually get a turnout of around 30 people, with an average of two or three new people coming along each month.”

“It’s a great opportunity to meet fellow ‘H’ people and see how ‘normal’ we are, we really are just like you! The benefits are enormous, it can actually be a life changing experience for some. The relief people feel when they know they can finally talk about the subject openly without judgment is substantial. I highly recommend it!”

There are many support groups available Australia wide, check the internet or your local STI clinic for further information. If there isn’t one available in your area, consider starting one yourself. The need for a Herpes Support Group in Tasmania was very strongly felt by a few pro-active people who decided to create their own. Jas, one of the members, said “I came into the Tasmanian group shortly after it’s inception. The founding members had done a fantastic job creating the group website and from there it was just onwards and upwards. Within a few months we had a growing membership base and a fantastic website with links, resources and a discussion forum. The great thing is that the group can continue to grow on a ‘needs’ basis and that each member of the group can contribute in different and highly valuable ways.”

"We are also embarking on a public awareness campaign and have recently had an article published in a journal that goes out to all General Practitioners in Tasmania.”

Single people have the added hurdle of having to share their secret with new partners and this is where it can help if you have already shared the truth with someone else. People often expect the worst kind of reaction and when they finally work up the courage to tell someone they are often surprised by the results.

“I brought up the topic at a girls video night. We were all relaxed and happy, having had a few wines and we were talking about sex (as you do!). Once the topic was out there people just opened up about it, one girl admitted to having Oral Herpes and being afraid of passing that on to her boyfriend, another said her brother had it and most of them at least knew someone who either had Oral or Genital Herpes.”

Admitting to her friends that she had Herpes was very liberating for Charleen, “When I fessed up about it there were no recriminations or signs of disgust. It felt great to be able to talk about it at last without feeling ashamed.”

For Aiden the challenge was accepting that having Herpes is not a life sentence, nor even the death of his love life. “I remained celibate for about two years. Didn’t date, didn’t party, didn’t do much of anything! I virtually became a hermit. Eventually I woke up to myself and realised that this was no way to live, so I made an effort to rebuild my social contacts and get back out there.”

“It’s hard to know when to tell someone you’re seeing that you have an STI and my first few times were disastrous. Not in an ugly way, no nasty stuff, just the ‘let’s just be friends’ line, but eventually I did meet someone who wanted to be with me so much that having the virus didn’t have any impact on their choice. I’m in a serious relationship now and am very happy. My having Herpes has a very minor impact on our relationship.”

So, don’t be afraid to share your secret, whether it’s Herpes, another STI or something completely different. Don’t be afraid to be who you are and never underestimate the value of true friendship.

Note: Names and identifying details have been changed to protect identities.

Dating and the H Bomb!

© 2003 Jeannie May

In this new era of rampant STIs a new dating code is emerging to complicate the already muddy waters of relationship-etiquette, from asking about previous partners to insisting on sexual health checks before embarking on a sexual relationship and, for the millions affected by the Herpes virus, deciding when to drop the H Bomb!

Having 'the talk', informing your prospective sexual partners about your HSV status, explaining about the Herpes Virus, the risks involved and the necessary precautions can mean the end of a potential relationship – it can be the moment when you literally 'Bomb out!'

With eight in ten Australians affected by HSV 1 – oral cold sores and two in ten affected by HSV 2 – genital herpes, dropping the H Bomb is becoming a more common occurrence. Choosing the 'right' moment can be difficult at best, obviously it is better to discuss this before you become intimate, but broaching the subject too soon can also cause difficulties.

Jared: *If you 'tell' on the first date, it sounds like you're saying right away that this is only about sex, or that you are 'expecting' this date to develop into a sexual encounter.*

Angie: *I don't tell them on the first date, I like to wait until I know that there might be something worth developing before I give them the facts. Then I let them make the decision whether to explore the relationship further or not.*

It's essential that you choose your moment well, be prepared with leaflets and information available, and approach the whole topic in a calm and caring manner.

Rick: *I was really touched by Gayle's honesty, it showed how much she cared about me and how important our relationship was to her. I know it took a lot of courage for her to tell me and I respect her tremendously for that.*

Gayle: *I tried to tell him calmly but there were a few tears spilled as I tried to get the story out. My ex boyfriend never told me, although he certainly knew that he had it, and that has always had a great affect on me, I felt totally betrayed by his lack of honesty or compassion.*

Discovering you have contracted an incurable STI can be very difficult to come to terms with, not only are there health issues to deal with, but very often there are trust and betrayal issues to surmount as well. Then, there's the most difficult issue of all, the grim social stigma associated with having Herpes, which can lead to people keeping it a secret, denying it, avoiding relationships, suffering depression and even believing that they can no longer live a normal life.

Angie: *I was totally devastated when I found out. I just kept thinking "Why me?" It just seemed so bloody unfair!*

Jared: *For a long time I believed that I would never date again, I mean, how could I ever tell anyone about this, and how could I ever have a relationship and not tell? I thought I would never be intimate with anyone again for the rest of my life!*

Maree: *I felt so alone! I couldn't talk to anyone about it, not even my closest friends.*

Herpes is often seen as a taboo topic and while ever it remains so the accompanying social stigma will continue to haunt Herpes sufferers. The Herpes virus does not distinguish between good and bad, moral and immoral, young and old, straight, bisexual or gay. It affects people of all ages, from all walks of life and in all types of relationships.

Garth: I was a wreck until I found an internet support group. Finally there was someone I could talk to about it. People just like me who were going through all the same things I was. That really helped me come to terms with it.

Alicia: I told my Mum! We've always been very close and it was impossible to keep this from her. She knew immediately that something was up. I felt so ashamed, expecting her to be disappointed in me but she opened up about her encounter with crabs in her younger years and about how many people she knew who get Cold Sores – and this really is the same thing, it's just in another location.

Education and support are the keys to acceptance of Herpes. Once you accept that Herpes is a condition, like diabetes, which can be controlled with medication, then you are well on your way to developing your own personal health management plan.

David: I very rarely have outbreaks so I only take medication when I feel one coming on, often during stressful periods, like relationship dramas or around exam times.

Angie: My doctor didn't even prescribe meds for me, told me it was just cold sores and not to worry too much about it. I went through hell that first year, finally finding out about suppressive treatment changed my life! I felt human again!

Jared: Catching Herpes was like a wake-up call for me. I have a pretty high stress job which I used to allow to rule my life. Knowing that stress can bring on an outbreak I have changed my work style, I have a far more relaxed attitude to work now, I know that I can do it so I just choose not to stress over it anymore.

Coming to terms with Herpes can often be easier within a relationship environment because of the continual support available, but even those in relationships may one day find themselves playing the dating game again at some time in the future. Rejoining the singles scene post Herpes can be a traumatic experience. Fear of rejection lead many to avoid social situations and to dread being 'fixed up' by friends.

Vic: It got to the point where it was embarrassing, my mates were out there still enjoying the singles scene and I could no longer get into that. I could party on with them but I would never take a girl home with me, they all started to think I'd turned gay!

Angie: When I began dating again I only wanted to date fellow Herpes sufferers, I didn't want to think about the possibility of my ever being responsible for passing this virus on to someone else. I met a guy who changed my attitude completely, he told me that I could be denying someone the opportunity of loving me and I should never do that. Everyone deserves the chance to love whom they choose, no matter what.

Mick: *I didn't stop dating. I love women, their skin, their smiles, the way they laugh, I just love being around them. So, I'd just ask out anyone I fancied, we'd have a nice dinner or whatever, then I'd kiss them goodbye at their door and never call them again. Not that I didn't want to, just that I couldn't face up to telling them if it ever went any further.*

Luckily one lady didn't let that stop her, she pursued ME! I had to tell her the truth then and I expected it to send her running but she just accepted it without a moment's hesitation and told me not to be so damned silly! We're still together now after three years.

Corinne: *Not everyone is mature enough to handle this situation and I consider my rejections to be for the best – after all, what kind of a person rates someone's desirability and worth on the presence of a little virus?*

Attitudes are changing, acceptance and understanding is growing daily. There are thousands of sites on the internet offering information, advice and support. There are also a growing number of HSV positive dating sites catering to people with Herpes.

But hey, if you want to know the best way to avoid catching Herpes... get involved with someone who already has it! Because they are usually well informed about the virus and are prepared to take the necessary precautions to prevent you from contracting it. So don't ever let it stop you from embarking on a relationship, there are many far more important things which determine compatibility levels – and love doesn't take any of them into consideration anyway!

Responsible Sex?

© 2003 Jeannie May

Attitudes towards sexuality and relationships are constantly changing. From the 'Free Love, anything goes' attitude of the sixties to the 'Safe Sex' scare of the eighties and nineties with its influence on casual relationships, we have now entered the new millennium with a naively casual attitude towards sex. The "It won't happen to me" syndrome is alive and well in the 'noughties', leading to many people taking unnecessary risks.

With the continuing rise in the incidence of STIs it's time to take another look at our Safe Sex options and re-evaluate our attitude toward the risk factors involved, in order to make this the era of 'Responsible Sex.'

Of particular concern is the spread of viral STIs such as Herpes which can elude the regular Safe Sex practice of using condoms. The Herpes virus can be passed on via skin-to-skin contact, and since the lesions are not restricted to the penile/vaginal areas the use of condoms cannot offer complete protection from the virus. Additionally, the virus can also be passed on via oral sex, a apparently little known fact amongst the general public.

Whilst the use of condoms can reduce the risk of catching STIs, greater protection can be obtained using the female condom and dental dams, however they are more expensive than regular condoms and are not as readily available. They also require some getting 'used to' and it is important that they remain properly positioned.

Many cases of Herpes remain undiagnosed every year, symptoms vary and are even sometimes non-existent so it's no wonder that people are not taking precautions against passing on a virus which they are very often unaware they even have.

We need to all accept responsibility for protecting ourselves and our partners from sexually transmitted infections. Take measures to ensure that you are well informed about STIs, their symptoms and modes of transmission. Remember that STIs do not discriminate..... and never assume that it won't happen to you!

Herpes Myths

1. **Herpes can only be passed on when open lesions are present.**

Herpes can in fact be passed on when no symptoms are present, this is called 'Asymptomatic Shedding.'

2. **Cold Sores are not Herpes**

Whilst Cold Sores are not exactly the same as Genital Herpes, they do belong to the same viral family which also causes Chicken Pox. Cold Sores (HSV1) usually occur around the mouth and Herpes (HSV2) is usually located in the genital region. However, both forms of the virus can occur in the other region (or indeed anywhere on the body) and both can be transmitted by oral sex.

The good news is that oral HSV2 is very rare and usually does not recur, whilst genital HSV1 usually recurs infrequently and with milder symptoms than genital HSV2.

3. Pregnant women with Herpes must have a Caesarean

Vaginal birth is a viable option for pregnant women so long as there are no lesions present at the time of birth. The greatest danger to the unborn baby occurs when the mother acquires Herpes during pregnancy, particularly in the third trimester.

4. Only promiscuous people get STIs

Everyone who is sexually active is at risk of contracting an STI and since Herpes can also be transferred orally, even children are at risk of contracting Herpes.

Herpes Prevention and Management Tips

Following are some tips which can help to reduce the risk of passing on Herpes and to help those suffering outbreaks to learn to manage their condition.

1. Practice Safe Sex

The general rule of thumb that once you have passed the three month mark in your relationship and neither have shown any symptoms of an STI it is now OK to have unprotected sex can be misleading. Unfortunately, Herpes can lie dormant and unsuspected within your nervous system for many years, making it possible to have your first outbreak years into a monogamous relationship.

2. Get to know your Herpes!

Recognising the signs which indicate that an outbreak may be imminent, the preceding tingling or itching which is called the 'prodrome' can help you to catch the outbreak sooner, so you can start taking your medication early, thereby easing the symptoms, promoting faster healing, and sometimes even stopping the outbreak from occurring.

3. Abstinence from sex during outbreaks

Refrain from sexual contact during an outbreak as this is the period when the virus is in it's most active state. Find alternative ways to be intimate, such as hugging, caressing and kissing (not when oral cold sores are present). Rediscover your erogenous zones! Explore the possibilities....

4. Medication alternatives

Ask your doctor or sexual health clinic about the currently available medication which can be taken episodically – during outbreaks only, or suppressively – on a continuous basis to inhibit outbreaks. There are several different anti-viral medications on the market, some appear to work better for some people than others, so if you're not happy with your current medication, ask about the alternatives. It's important to note that suppressive treatment has also been shown to decrease the incidence of asymptomatic shedding (shedding viral particles without any symptoms) reducing the possibility of passing on the virus between outbreaks, which is particularly important if you are in a relationship with a non-H person.

5. **Emotional Support**

The emotional fallout from contracting an incurable STI such as Herpes can be devastating. Coming to terms with it can take time and a great deal of support for some people. Being able to express your feelings about having Herpes and the effect it has on your relationship can be extremely helpful, whether it's your doctor, a counsellor, a friend or family member. Ask your medical practitioner for contact details for support groups or check out the many online support groups available on the internet.

6. **De-stressing your lifestyle**

Stress can be a major trigger for outbreaks so taking measures to reduce your stress levels can greatly improve your condition. This can be done by making changes to your workload, reworking your schedule so you feel less pressured, learning relaxation techniques such as meditation, yoga or Tai Chi, indulging in an aromatherapy massage, and making sure you take some 'time out' for yourself on a regular basis.

7. **Ice Packs**

Using an ice pack on the area can help relieve the inflammation and if used during the prodrome stage may even stop an outbreak occurring.

8. **Good old soap and water**

Taking a warm soapy shower before sex even when no symptoms are present can be used as an added precaution against passing on the virus since soap kills the virus for a short period of time. An added bonus is that sharing a shower can be a great form of foreplay too!

9. **Alternative medicines**

Aromatherapy and vitamin therapy has proved beneficial for some so it's worth checking out what's available in these areas.. Lavender, Eucalyptus, Bergamot, Geranium, Peppermint, Melissa and Tea Tree oil have been found to be of assistance with Herpes, both oral and genital. They can be used in a bath or applied directly on the sores (in a carrier oil) to aid in the healing process. (It is recommended that you consult a professional aromatherapist since essential oils can be dangerous when used incorrectly.)

Australian Herpes Support Groups

Gold Coast H Friends	http://au.geocities.com/gchfriends http://au.groups.yahoo.com/group/gchfriends
Herpes Hangout	http://au.groups.yahoo.com/group/herpeshangout
Herpes in Brisbane	http://groups.msn.com/HerpesinBrisbane
Melbourne Herpes Self Help Group	http://home.vicnet.net.au/~mhshg/
Perth Herpes Group	http://geocities.com/perthgroup/
South Australian Herpes Support Group	http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saherpes/
Tasmanian Herpes Social Support Group	http://groups.msn.com/THSSG
The Sydney Group	http://www.geocities.com/sydneygroup/

About the Author

Jeannie May is currently working on a book about coming to terms with Herpes, a collection of real life experiences. She has created a Herpes support group for the Gold Coast area and is one of the organisers of 'Hevent - Australia's National Herpes Gatherings.'

Hevent http://au.geocities.com/australian_hevent

