



# Up close & personal

When Lisa\* started dating again at 40, she got

**It's January 2007, and I'm on a second date** with the

first man to pique my interest since my husband died two years ago. I've drunk too much to drive, so when he suggests going to his house to call a taxi, it seems a natural step. Instead, we have sex.

I don't insist he uses a condom; he doesn't offer.

*My complacency seems shocking, but looking back, it was naïvety. I didn't know then that this would change my life.*

One week later I'm in the shower when I find a little white lump on my labia. I don't feel run down or tired, but I call my doctor and make an appointment. "That looks like genital herpes," she says after examining me. The words catapult into my vernacular for the first time. Tears prick my eyes as she writes a script for antiviral medication, and tells me I'm lucky that I haven't got gonorrhoea or syphilis. But I don't feel lucky – herpes is incurable; this will be mine for life. She sends me away with some pamphlets and I can't remember driving home.

At home I google frantically. There are photos, personal stories, lots of stuff about "shedding". I read it all. I

discover that the virus sheds from the skin without you even knowing, so I won't know when I'm contagious and when I'm not. So, in effect, I will always be contagious. I find out that I could have contracted this even if we had used protection.

The man who passed on the virus kindly tells me he has no symptoms. I don't know if I believe him. I suggest he goes for a test but it's the last I hear from him. During this time I discover that herpes is not a registered disease, that if you go to your GP and ask for a full STI check-up you will not be tested for it – you need to specifically ask for a blood test for this. There are heaps of people who are carriers of the virus but are asymptomatic;

hence why it spreads so far.

Over the next 12 months I deal with painful blisters, high fevers, body aches that last for up to five days, and sore rashes on my spine, legs and genitals. Everyone I talk to professionally – my GP, a sexual health counsellor – shrugs it off and tell me it's only a virus and that I will be able to function normally in life. I try to ride with this and, as I click my way through herpes forums and chatrooms, I realise I am far, far from alone. One in eight adults have genital herpes. One in six women have it. And in Australia it's most prevalent in women aged 35 to 44. I was a prime candidate. The knowledge that it's so widespread makes me look around at my friends and family



and realise that some of them must be holding this secret too. And many of them may have it but just don't know because they don't have breakouts like I do.

Depression creeps up on me. So consumed am I by the thought that I'm damaged goods and will never meet a man who will love me and my two sons that, for a while, I can't look after them without help. My family come to my aid, confused by what's happening to me; I'm too embarrassed to tell them. Eventually, I lose 13 kilograms and my job over this.

### Rules of attraction

One day I stumble across [livingsphere.com](http://livingsphere.com) – a site where genital herpes sufferers purge their stories and offer help through experience. Over the next few months my fellow sufferers become my anchors and pull me out of insanity. I discover it affects us all in different ways – some people have an outbreak of blisters on their nose or their eye or their hands. I come to realise that being a carrier means I have a responsibility to inform potential lovers. Months later, when I meet a man I like enough to want to kiss, I take a breath and tell him, and he responds by telling me I'm a big waste. Ouch. I develop a policy to be upfront as soon as I know there's an attraction – before we hold hands, before we kiss. I won't lie, it's a battle. I see their attraction to me and yet I know the words I need to say might taint the way they look at me forever. I make it my policy to always bring it up face-to-face, so I can gauge their reaction. Responses range from complete shock to being totally OK with it. Some have even said "I don't care, I'll have it too and we can share" – but I'll explain that it's not that easy. In an unexpected way it ends up sorting the good from the

bad. Most realise it doesn't change who I am, and that's when I know I'm onto a winner.

### Starting over

Eventually, I reach acceptance. It takes a year-long rollercoaster of anger and depression to get there. I come to learn that if I'm overworked or hitting the booze, I'm more likely to get an outbreak. Unexpectedly, herpes becomes a red flag my body waves to let me know I need to slow down, get more sleep, eat well. An outbreak can be triggered when I meet someone I like, as with the tingle of longing comes the knowing that I'll have to have "the conversation" with them. It's not a constant battle to keep the virus at bay, as I can now connect fear and anger with getting symptoms.

I believe this happened to make me reassess my life. I was newly widowed and lonely – herpes stopped me from diving into bed with men. Now the right person for me will have to take me as I am. I have to build a rapport with a man before sex, and this builds respect too. All of this has made me stronger, braver. I take better care of my health now than ever. I can't blame anybody, as I chose not to use a condom. But I can choose to be informed and healthy and by doing this I no longer feel disempowered. **WH**

*NB: Doctors don't test for genital herpes along with other STIs unless it's requested because the blood test results are difficult to interpret – there are two types of herpes simplex virus, and both type 1 (most common cause of cold sores) and type 2 (most common cause of recurrent genital herpes sores) can cause genital herpes. Taking a swab test from a genital sore is the only way to accurately diagnose genital herpes. For more info on genital herpes visit [thefacts.com.au](http://thefacts.com.au).*

## WH TESTS IT... SEXUAL HEALTH STUFF

Apart from the fact that you really don't want nasty, artificial chemicals anywhere near your bits, some sexual health products are no good for the planet. So we tried out some eco-friendly alternatives...

### Lunette Menstrual Cup (A)

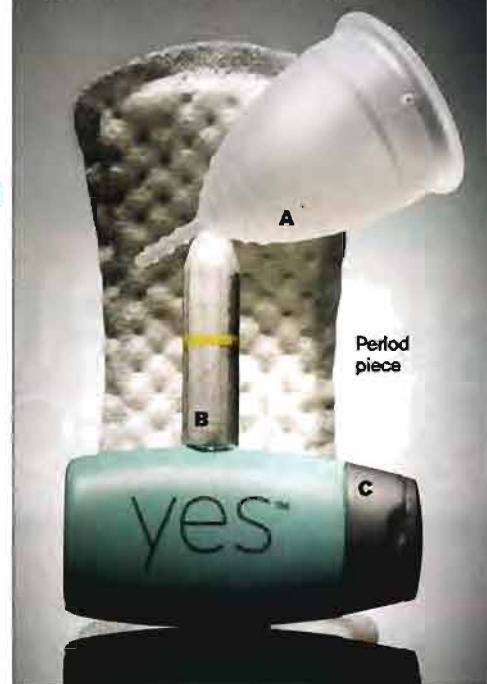
This hypo-allergenic silicone cup can be used for five to 10 years, so it saves the planet from mounds of tossed tampons and pads and you mounds of cash. Regular users swear by it, but what did our first-timer, *WH* Senior Sub-Editor Alice E, 26, think? "I was warned it could be tricky to insert at first. It was. But I got the hang of it by my next period. I could hardly feel it. You only empty it two to four times a day, so I didn't have to do it at work (eww!). It was fine to sleep in, and I did strength training without probs. You just pop it in boiling water to sanitise it." \$57; [ecobabe.com.au](http://ecobabe.com.au)

### Natracare tampons & pads (B)

Most tampons contain petroleum-derived products, and pads are usually made from fairly indestructible plastic. But Natracare pads are made from biodegradable plant cellulose and its tampons are 100 per cent pesticide-free, chlorine-free cotton. How did they perform for *WH* Chief Sub-Editor Alison, 35? "The tampons fluffed a tiny bit more, and both tampons and pads weren't as absorbent as some planet-destroying brands, but both are effective. I'm a convert." *Ultra Pads With Wings (regular)*: \$6.95 per 10 pack; *Non-Applicator Regular Tampons*: \$7.94 per 20 pack; 1300 529 100

### Yes water-based intimate lubricant (C)

This is made from organic plant-based ingredients and contains no nasties. *WH*'s sex expert Jacqueline Hellyer says it did the job: "It was lighter – quite gelatinous – than other lubes, and not sticky. But it didn't last long so I needed to use lots. It didn't irritate my skin, but it had a slight smell like plasticine. I'd use it again, but I prefer Sylk – also made from all-natural ingredients." \$14.85; [downtoearthorganics.com.au](http://downtoearthorganics.com.au)



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Percentage of Women's Health readers who have had a full STI check-up  
SOURCE: ONLINE POLL OF 420 READERS