

Recurring genital problems could be herpes

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A study of patients attending sexual health clinics in Gothenburg found that just four out of ten patients with genital herpes actually knew that they had the disorder. However, a third of those who did not realise that they had been infected reported typical symptoms at a follow-up visit, reveals a thesis from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

In her thesis Matilda Berntsson, a specialist in skin and sexually transmitted infections at the Frölunda Specialist Hospital's skin clinic and researcher at the Sahlgrenska Academy, investigated the prevalence of genital [herpes](#) type 2 among patients attending sexual health clinics in Gothenburg. Her investigation included more than 1,000 patients, both male and female.

Genital herpes caused by herpes [simplex virus](#) type 2 infects the genital membranes before moving to the nerve ganglia alongside the spinal cord, where it remains for the rest of a patient's life. Although many people who have been infected do not experience any discomfort, the virus can be activated and spread further through sexual contact. The disorder can also result in recurring genital problems.

"1,014 patients who attended sexual health clinics, the Sahlgrenska University Hospital skin clinic and the Sesam sexual health clinic were tested for herpes simplex virus type 2," says Matilda Berntsson. "The presence of antibodies in the blood shows that a person is infected with the virus."

The test results revealed that more than one in five women and one in

ten men were infected with genital herpes type 2. Just four out of ten patients with herpes type 2 antibodies actually knew that they were infected. However, a third of those patients who did not know that they were infected reported typical symptoms in the form of recurring genital blisters and sores at a follow-up visit.

"The study reinforces our perception that genital herpes is common and that most people carrying it are unaware that they have it," says Berntsson. "Non-specific recurring genital symptoms could be undiagnosed herpes, which can be detected with a simple test at the doctor's."

She therefore suggests that people with non-specific genital symptoms who are worried about genital herpes should see a doctor for an examination.

"If the symptoms and/or findings suggest herpes, there are good methods for testing for the disorder," says Berntsson. "Pronounced symptoms can be treated with medicines that alleviate discomfort, and a daily preventative treatment can be given for longer periods where recurrences are frequent."

Genital herpes caused by herpes simplex virus type 2 spreads through sexual contact, and more than 500 million people worldwide have the disorder. In the West 10-30% of the population carry the virus, making it one of the most widespread sexually transmitted infections. The virus causes painful sores and blisters in the genital area and, in rare cases, serious infections in the brain and spinal cord. The infection is for life and there are currently no cures or vaccines for [genital herpes](#). Herpes simplex virus type 1, which generally causes oral herpes/cold sores, can also infect the genitals, but tends not to result in recurring problems.

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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