



# PATHOLOGY TESTS EXPLAINED

Information about pathology tests to help everyone take control of their health and make the right decisions about their care.

## WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT **YOUR TEST FOR HERPES**

Herpes is a common infection that is caused by the herpes simplex virus. There are two types:

- HSV-1 usually causes sores around the lips and mouth. It can also spread to the genital area through oral sex.
- HSV-2 infects the genital area where it causes blisters around the vagina, on the penis, around the anus, or on the buttocks or thighs.



### What to expect if you have herpes

Herpes is rarely a serious health risk. At the time of the first infection, it is not uncommon to experience a few days of fever, headache, or tiredness. Blisters and sores can appear at the site of infection within two weeks and typically in five to seven days after the virus is transmitted. The blisters and sores usually heal within two to four weeks.

After the first time you are infected, the virus goes into an inactive state. It may cause outbreaks of blisters from time to time that last for about a week and then disappear. Recurrent episodes are usually much less severe than the first outbreak. The frequency and severity of recurrent episodes varies from person to person.

The herpes simplex virus is transmitted through direct contact, which include all types of skin-to-skin contact.

Throughout the world, genital herpes infections are the most common cause of genital ulcers. Genital herpes is not a reportable disease in Australia and so the rates are not accurately known. However, it is estimated that up to 60 per cent of people do not know they are infected because they either don't have any symptoms or else their symptoms are mild. Most people contract genital herpes from someone who did not know they were infected.



## Testing for herpes

### PCR genetic test

This test takes a swab or scraping from a blister or sore in the mouth or genital area. A PCR genetic test is used to detect the DNA of the herpes virus. This is the only way to diagnose herpes accurately. If you go to your doctor when you do not have a sore, a swab test cannot be used for diagnosis.

### Serology blood test

This is a blood test that looks for the antibodies your immune system makes to fight off the herpes virus.

This type of testing has limitations. It can take between six to eight weeks to detect antibodies in a blood sample after you first become infected. Also, antibodies can disappear with time, especially if you don't have many subsequent outbreaks. The serology blood test is no longer performed in many labs as the results often cause confusion. They may give a positive result in about five per cent of people who do not have HSV infection (false-positive) and a negative result in about 15 per cent of people who really are infected (false negative).



## What can your results show?

### PCR genetic test

A positive result from the sample of the sore indicates active herpes, either HSV-1 or HSV-2. A genetic test can differentiate between the virus types and show if you have either or both types of herpes virus. If you have a negative PCR genetic result it may mean you do not have herpes but it's possible you do have herpes but there was not enough virus in the sample to detect.

### Serology blood test

The serology blood test can show whether you have been infected with the herpes virus at some time in the past, but it cannot tell whether you are currently infected or when you became infected. Neither can it tell where the infection occurred.



## Treatment

For genital herpes, the most common treatment is valacyclovir in tablet form. Cold sores are usually treated with topical therapies.

Eye infections can be treated with drugs or topical therapies. For babies or immunosuppressed people such as those who have an underlying health condition, are elderly or being treated for cancer, the therapy of choice is often intravenous acyclovir.

All anti-herpes medications work by interfering with the copying of viral DNA which stops the virus reproducing. Treatments do not cure the herpes infection, but they can shorten the duration of and reduce the severity of outbreaks. Long-term suppressive oral therapy can reduce the frequency of outbreaks.



### Questions to ask your doctor

- Why does this test need to be done?
- Do I need to prepare (such as fast or avoid medications) for the sample collection?
- Will an abnormal result mean I need further tests?
- How could it change the course of my care?
- What will happen next, after the test?

For more detailed information on these and many other tests go to [pathologytestsexplained.org.au](http://pathologytestsexplained.org.au)



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[www.pathologytestsexplained.org.au](http://www.pathologytestsexplained.org.au)

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Pathology Tests Explained is managed by a consortium of medical and scientific organisations representing pathology practice in Australia. More details at:

[www.pathologytestsexplained.org.au/about](http://www.pathologytestsexplained.org.au/about)



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### My Health Record

You'll find a direct link to the Pathology Tests Explained website embedded in the pathology results pages of your My Health Record.

Click on the link to find information about what your tests are investigating or measuring and what your results can tell your doctor.