Dear Alice,

The question I have is very important. A friend of mine contracted herpes through her first boyfriend. Well, first sexual boyfriend and he says he doesn't have it. Yet where did she get it? She was defending him and blaming herself. I tried telling her that they don't call it an STD for nothing. Now she swears she got it from a tanning bed. I personally don't believe it. Could this be true? If so, why haven't I heard anything on it?

Worried Friend

Answer

Dear Worried Friend,

You're right, genital herpes isn't classified as a sexually transmitted infection (STI, the new term for sexually transmitted disease, or STD) for nothing! The most likely way to get herpes is through direct skin-to-skin contact, which often happens during sexual contact and/or intercourse. Herpes, which usually manifests as "blisters" or painful, fluid-filled sores on and/or around the genital area, and sometimes even on the thighs and buttocks, is transmitted through contact with the sores of an infected person, not from her/his bodily fluids. The newly infected person's sores will show up in the same area as the point of contact during the transmission of herpes.

Normally, the herpes virus cannot live outside of a human host for more than a short amount of time. Some studies have shown that the virus can live up to several hours under warm, moist conditions, such as those created by steam baths and hot tubs. In such situations, however, the virus is weakened significantly, making it unlikely for infection to occur.

So how the heck did your friend get herpes? If your friend has had close sexual contact with a person besides the boyfriend you mentioned, it is possible that she got the herpes virus from this other person. Bear in mind, though, that the incubation period for herpes is 2 to 20 days (but it can last longer). The other scenario is that her boyfriend does have herpes, but just doesn't know it. This is not uncommon, especially for men because they often attribute herpes episodes to jock itch and/or ingrown hairs (if the sores are mild enough).

Her boyfriend could also have an asymptomatic case of herpes; that is, he carries the virus but does not experience any symptoms of the disease. Asymptomatic cases of herpes will "shed" several days a year, meaning that the virus comes up to the skin's surface and can be transmitted to another person during that time. Another possibility is your friend had oral sex...
with someone who had fever blisters or cold sores. His cold sores? Herpes Simplex Virus Type 1 (HSV-1)? could have led to a genital infection for her.

Although herpes seems to have quite a stigma attached to it, it is herpes is manageable. It may take a while for your friend to accept and learn to live with herpes. Perhaps you can read the related Q&As listed below, which address provide information and address strategies for living with herpes. If you feel comfortable, you could even share these resources with your friend.

You may not be able to convince your friend of whom (or what) she got herpes from; and, at this point, that may not be very important. What is important is that she knows you support and care about her.

Alice!
Category:
Sexual & Reproductive Health [2]
Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI's) [3]
Herpes [4]

Related questions
Herpes transmission from sharing soap? [6]
Indoor testicle tanning: Do they need protection, too? [7]
Non-sexual herpes transmission? [8]
Scared and hopeless with herpes [9]
Herpes recurs more often in the wintertime? [10]

Published date:
Oct 11, 1996
Last reviewed on:
Mar 23, 2015

Footer menu
Contact Alice!
- Content Use
- Media Inquiries
- Comments & Corrections
Syndication & Licensing
- Licensing Q&As
- Get Alice! on Your Website
- Full Site Syndication
- Link to Go Ask Alice!

Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.
If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

Source URL: http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/herpes-tanning-bed#comment-0

Links