Genital Herpes – Key Management Points

- Genital herpes is under-recognised and under-treated. Minor lesions are common; any recurring localised anogenital symptoms or lesions should be investigated as possible genital herpes.
- Oral antiviral treatment of the first clinical episode (without waiting for results) should always be offered, regardless of the time of symptom onset. The ‘72 hour’ herpes zoster rule does NOT apply to first episode genital herpes infection.
- Antiviral therapy of recurrent genital herpes may be suppressive or episodic.
- Some patients prefer suppressive antiviral therapy. It is often considered for those with frequent and/or severe recurrences or associated psychosocial morbidity. Adherence to suppressive treatment reduces but does not eliminate transmission.
- For those on episodic antiviral therapy, it is more effective when patients start therapy themselves at the first signs of a recurrence; this requires anticipatory prescribing (“pill-in-the-pocket” antibiotic prescription).
- Neonatal HSV infection needs specialist advice on management for women with a history of genital herpes and active lesions at term and especially in the high-risk situation of a first episode up to 6 weeks prior to delivery.
- Neonatal HSV infection is a rare, but potentially fatal, disease of babies, occurring within the first 4-6 weeks of life. Symptoms are non-specific and a high index of suspicion is required. Most neonatal HSV infections are acquired at birth, generally from mothers with an unrecognised first genital herpes infection acquired during pregnancy.

What’s new since 2015

Valaciclovir
The special authority and Hospital Medicines List restriction was removed from 1 March 2016 (Pharmac).
This is recommended first line treatment.

Treatment of first episode genital herpes
- Oral valaciclovir 500mg bd for 7/7 or longer if new lesions appear during treatment or healing is incomplete.
- Immunocompromised patients consider valaciclovir 1g bd for 7 to 10 days.
- Alternative: oral aciclovir 400mg 3 times daily (8 hourly) for 7 days.

Treatment of recurrent genital herpes

Episodic Treatment
- Oral valaciclovir 500mg bd for 3/7.
- Alternative: oral aciclovir 800mg 3 times daily for 2 days.

Prescribe enough tablets for patients to be able to self-initiate treatment at onset of symptoms.

Suppressive therapy
Only recommended for people with HSV confirmed on testing. Given daily to prevent recurrences and reduce asymptomatic shedding. Suggest prescribing for 12 months, followed by a break of 3 months to see if recurrences are still frequent and/or bothersome.
- Oral valaciclovir 500mg daily (increase to 500mg bd on individual basis of clinical presentation and/or having breakthrough recurrences on 500mg daily).
- Alternative: oral aciclovir 400mg twice daily.

Epidemiology
- As many as one in five adults in New Zealand have genital herpes due to HSV-2, most will have asymptomatic or unrecognised disease.
- Genital herpes due to HSV-1 (through oral to genital transmission) has also become common; HSV-1 is a frequent cause of primary genital herpes.
- The natural history of genital HSV-1 infection involves significantly fewer clinically apparent recurrences and less subclinical shedding than HSV-2.
Management of First Episode of Genital Herpes

Patient presents with first episode of genital herpes

Check symptom history, examine and take viral swab

Immediate treatment ALL patients

- Oral valaciclovir 500 mg twice daily for 7 days
- Alternative: oral aciclovir 400 mg 3 times a day (8 hourly) for 5 to 7 days

Suggest other treatment:
- Salt washes
- Topical anaesthetic creams
- Oral analgesics
- Oral fluids

Provide patient information:
- Written information
- Helpline tollfree 0508 11 12 13
- Website www.herpes.org.nz
- Refer to sexual health clinic if appropriate

Consider referral for specialised counselling

If complications developing consider referral to specialist

Offer referral to support system

Virology confirmed

YES

Diagnosis confirmed

NO

Diagnosis not excluded

Reassess in 5 to 7 days

Answer further questions.
Arrange appointment with partner if required.
Provide anticipatory “pill-in-the-pocket” episodic treatment – valaciclovir 500 mg twice daily for 3 days (50 tablets)

Assess psychological status

a In cases of immunocompromised patients or herpes proctitis, refer to specialist.
b Specialist consultation is recommended for use of antivirals in pregnancy.
c Recommend early presentation for viral swab if recurrence.
Management of Recurrent Episodes of Genital Herpes

Patient presents with recurrent episodes of genital herpes

Virology confirmed

NO

Other cause(s) of recurrent genital lesions diagnosed

YES

Refer for specialist consultation

YES

Treat as appropriate

YES

Other psychological problems unmasked

NO

Provide patient information:
- written information
- Helpline tollfree 0508 11 12 13
- Website www.herpes.org.nz

YES

Offer referral to support system or sexual health clinic if appropriate

Other cause(s) of recurrent genital lesions diagnosed

NO

YES

Treat as appropriate

YES

Treat as appropriate

YES

Virology confirmed

YES

Refer for specialist consultation

Other cause(s) of recurrent genital lesions diagnosed

NO

YES

Treat as appropriate

YES

Frequent/severe or problematic in any way

NO

Suppressive therapy required

NO

Oral antiviral for 1 year:
- valaciclovir 500 mg daily (see "d" below right)
- Aciclovir 400 mg bd

YES

After 1 year discuss withdrawal for 3 months to monitor recurrence pattern

NO

Problematic recurrences

NO

Offer further suppressive therapy

YES

Offer episodic therapy

NO

Valaciclovir 500 mg twice daily for 3 days
- Alternative: oral aciclovir 800 mg 3 times daily for 2 days
Prescribe enough tablets for patient to self-initiate at onset of symptoms

YES

Assess psychological status

Other psychological problems unmasked

NO

Treat as appropriate. Consider referral for specialist counselling

YES

Offer episodic therapy

NO

Oral antiviral for year:
- valaciclovir 500 mg daily (see "d" below right)
- Aciclovir 400 mg bd

YES

After 1 year discuss withdrawal for 3 months to monitor recurrence pattern

NO

Problematic recurrences

IN CASES OF IMMUNOCOMPROBANCED PATIENTS OR HERPES PROCTITIS, REFER TO SPECIALIST

SPECIALIST CONSULTATION IS RECOMMENDED FOR USE OF ANTIVIRALS IN PREGNANCY.

RECOMMEND SELF-APPLIED SWAB OR EARLY PRESENTATION FOR VIRAL SWAB IF RECURRENCE.

INCREASE TO 500 MG BD ON INDIVIDUAL BASIS OF CLINICAL PRESENTATION AND/OR HAVING BREAKTHROUGH RECURRENCES ON 500MG DAILY.
Management of women with suspected genital herpes in pregnancy (in consultation with a specialist)

For first or second trimester acquisition, suppressive aciclovir or valaciclovir therapy can be used to treat symptomatic recurrences. From 36 weeks, treatment can be considered to reduce the chance of a recurrence at term and hence the need for caesarean section. Effects on the neonate have not been fully determined. However, aciclovir (and to a lesser extent valaciclovir, which is a pro-drug of aciclovir) has been widely used in pregnancy without reported adverse consequences. See full text for further information.

SEM – skin, eye and/or mouth lesions only.

* For first or second trimester acquisition, suppressive aciclovir or valaciclovir therapy can be used to treat symptomatic recurrences. From 36 weeks, treatment can be considered to reduce the chance of a recurrence at term and hence the need for caesarean section. Effects on the neonate have not been fully determined. However, aciclovir (and to a lesser extent valaciclovir, which is a pro-drug of aciclovir) has been widely used in pregnancy without reported adverse consequences. See full text for further information.

** SEM – skin, eye and/or mouth lesions only.
Management of women with history of genital herpes prior to pregnancy and women with first clinical episode greater than 6 weeks prior to delivery (in consultation with a specialist)

- For women with recurrences during pregnancy, suppressive aciclovir or valaciclovir therapy can be used to treat symptomatic recurrences. From 36 weeks treatment can be considered to reduce the chance of a recurrence at term and hence the need for caesarean section. Effects on the neonate have not been fully determined. However, aciclovir (and to a lesser extent valaciclovir, which is a pro-drug of aciclovir) has been widely used in pregnancy without reported adverse consequences. See full text for further information.

- Take swabs from baby’s nasopharynx/mouth, conjunctiva, umbilicus, rectum, plus urine. Swabs best deferred until > 24 hours of age.

- Follow baby closely.

- Take blood and CSF for HSV PCR prior to starting aciclovir treatment if indicated on clinical grounds.

- History of recurrent herpes or clinical episode greater than 6 weeks prior to delivery
  
  Mark history of HSV infection on mother’s and baby’s charts*
  
  Consider suppressive valaciclovir/aciclovir greater than 36 weeks*

  Are herpetic lesions present at delivery?

  YES
  
  Offer delivery by caesarean section – the risk of transmission is low but caesarean section is protective

  NO
  
  Deliver baby vaginally. Avoid routine use of instruments

  History of recurrence this pregnancy

  YES
  
  NO
Key Information to provide patients on diagnosis – available on www.herpes.org.nz – 3 minute Patient (PowerPoint) Tool (under Health Professionals tab)

- Up to one in three people have genital herpes, but only 20% of them experience symptoms. (This includes genital herpes caused by both HSV-1 and HSV-2.)
- Most people (80%) who become infected with genital herpes will not have any symptoms, or have such mild symptoms that they will not be recognised or diagnosed as genital herpes. 75% of herpes is acquired from partners unaware they have it.
- For most people who experience symptoms, genital herpes is a sometimes-recurring ‘cold sore’ on the genitals. It does not affect your overall health or longevity of life.
- A small percentage of people who get genital herpes may experience problematic recurrences.
- There is effective oral anti-viral treatment available.
- People who experience a first episode of genital herpes will get better, lesions will heal and there will be no evidence of the initial lesions left.
- Most people who experience a first episode of HSV-2 will have recurrences, but they are generally milder than the first episode. HSV-1 tends to cause fewer recurrences than HSV-2.
- Getting genital herpes in a long-term relationship does not mean that the other partner has been unfaithful. However, a full sexual health screen may be reassuring.
- Where both partners in a long-term relationship have the virus, use of condoms is not necessary as they cannot reinfect each other.
- It is advisable to avoid sexual contact when lesions are present, as friction may delay healing.
- Oral to genital transmission of HSV-1 is very common through oral sex. This can happen when ‘cold sores’ are not causing symptoms.
- Genital herpes does not affect your fertility or stop you having children. Vaginal delivery is usual for most women with a history of genital herpes.
- Genital herpes does not stop you having sex.
- Anybody with genital herpes, whether they get symptoms or have never had symptoms, may shed the virus from time to time with no symptoms present.
- There is no evidence that genital herpes causes cancer of the cervix.
- Condoms reduce the risk of transmission. The use of condoms in a long-term relationship should be a matter of discussion between the individuals. It is advisable to avoid genital-to-genital contact, even with a condom, until any lesions are completely healed.
- Even if the virus is passed on, the most likely outcome is that the person will never experience symptoms.
- Ensure patients have access to the NZHF patient pamphlets and/or the HELPLINE TOLLFREE 0508 11 12 13 or visit www.herpes.org.nz