GENITAL HERPES: PATIENT INFORMATION

DEFINITION:

Genital herpes is one of two types of herpes viral infections and is known as herpes type 2 (HSV 2). It is transmitted by sexual relations—either intercourse or oral sex.

INCIDENCE:

Many authorities believe that the incidence of genital herpes is approaching epidemic proportions. For instance, some estimates indicate that 300,000 people are infected with herpes each year.

SIGNS/SYMPTOMS:

The virus lies dormant inside infected cells until the right conditions for growth occur. Then, the infected cells begin to grow causing one or more blisters, usually first appearing on the skin of the vagina (vulva) or on the penis; the blisters may also appear inside the vagina and extend to the cervix. Minor irritation and itching usually precede the onset of pain. The blisters rupture, leaving painful, shallow ulcers which can become infected and require several weeks for healing.

The first time an infection occurs, there may be great discomfort and a generalized illness, including fever, enlarge lymph nodes, pelvic pain and painful urination.

During periods when no symptoms exist, the virus returns to a dormant state. Recurrent symptoms result from reactivation of the virus. The severity of discomfort varies greatly from person to person and between occurrences in the same person.

CAUSES:

Genital herpes can be transmitted by a sexual partner who has active herpes lesions on the genitals or lips. Some believe that periods of stress can increase susceptibility to primary or recurrent infection. This stress can arise from illness, fatigue, anxiety and diminished immune responses.

PREVENTION:
Avoid sex during the active phase of infection with either oral or genital herpes. If you are suspicious, insist upon use of a rubber condom for protection. Spermicidal creams and foams with a diaphragm cannot be relied upon.

COMPLICATIONS:

- Mothers who are actively infected with genital herpes at the time of delivery may transmit the disease to the newborn.
- Women with recurrent genital herpes infections have a 2-4 times higher risk of developing cervical cancer, possibly in combination with other diseases.
- Active herpes lesions may increase the risk of transmission of other diseases.

TREATMENT:

- Treatment of acute infections may involve the use of oral medications, such as Acyclovir, Famcyclovir or Valcyclovir.
- Frequent recurrent infections may require long-term suppressive treatment.
- Avoid panties made from nylon, dacron, silk or other materials which do not ventilate.
- Do not douche unless recommended by your physician.
- Avoid sexual relations until symptoms and lesions are resolved.
- Try to avoid contact of lesions with urine by urinating through a tubular device (toilet paper role) or in the shower.
- Maintain a healthy diet, lifestyle and stay as active as your condition and feeling of well-being allow. If you have a fever and feel ill, you should rest until the acute symptoms resolve.

- You should notify potential sex partners if either of you is suspicious of active herpes lesions in the future.