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Infection From Genital Herpes Virus Soars in US

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - The number of Americans infected with genital herpes each year climbed 82% between 1970 and 1985, led by women, blacks and twenty-somethings, US researchers report.

Their study, published in the May issue of the American Journal of Epidemiology, found that the rate of new infections each year rose to 8.4 per 1,000 people from 4.6 per 1,000 people during that time.

Women had higher rates of infection than men (9.9 versus 6.9 per 1,000) and blacks had higher rates of infection than whites (20.4 versus 6.3 per 1,000), the investigators found. Those aged 20 to 29 had higher infection rates than any other age group (14.6 per 1,000 men and 22.5 per 1,000 women).

And a greater percentage of women were being infected with the virus during pregnancy, the researchers note, putting their babies at risk for neonatal herpes, a disease that can cause permanent brain damage in those who survive.

The study did not investigate the reasons behind the increase in infection rates. But the researchers say their results underscore the need for prevention efforts that encourage people in their teens and 20s to have sex with fewer people and to use condoms, even though condoms are not entirely effective in preventing the spread of herpes. Efforts to develop a vaccine against genital herpes are ongoing.

"If the current trend of increasing prevalence is to be reversed, strong prevention efforts will be needed as well as new technologies, such as vaccines," Dr. Gregory L. Armstrong of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) in Atlanta, Georgia, and colleagues write.

They note that there is no reason to believe that rates of infection have leveled off or declined in the past 20 years, citing at least one US study that found the presence of antibodies against the herpes virus increased to about 22% of people aged 12 years and older in the early 1990s from less than 17% in the late 1970s.

Genital herpes, or herpes simplex virus-2 (HSV-2), is often "silent," causing no outward symptoms. Infected people can have periodic outbreaks of blisters and ulcers that can transmit

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the disease to others. Once infected, a person remains infected for life.

In the United States, 45 million people aged 12 and older, or one out of five of the total adolescent and adult population, is infected with genital herpes, studies have found.

According to the current study, roughly 1.64 million people were being newly infected each year with HSV-2 by 1985.




SOURCE: American Journal of Epidemiology 2001;153:912-920.

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