

# Cold Sores and Genital Herpes in Pregnancy and Breastfeeding

December 2025

*Information in this leaflet is general in nature and should not take the place of advice from your healthcare provider. With every pregnancy there is a 3 to 5% risk of having a baby with a birth defect or developmental problem. Breastmilk provides optimum nutrition for babies and conveys many additional health benefits to mother and baby.*

## What is herpes simplex virus (HSV)?

Herpes simplex virus (HSV) is a common viral infection. There are two main types of HSV:

- HSV-1 (type 1) commonly causes cold sores on the face and lips, and sometimes on the genitals
- HSV-2 (type 2) causes mostly genital herpes<sup>1</sup>

## What are cold sores?

Cold sores, sometimes referred to as 'oral herpes', are blisters that generally develop on the skin, in or around the mouth and nose. Many people carry the virus but do not regularly suffer from cold sores. This means you can carry the virus without knowing it. If you have had cold sores before, it is quite common to have an outbreak during pregnancy, even if you have been unaffected for many years.<sup>1</sup>

## What is genital herpes?

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that can cause outbreaks of blisters or sores on the parts of the skin that have contact with a partner during sex, such as the genitals and anus. After the first episode, the virus stays in your body for the rest of your life, which means you can have recurrent outbreaks of sores and blisters. These recurrent episodes are usually milder, shorter and less frequent over time. This is because your body develops antibodies that help to control the virus.<sup>2</sup>

## Issues for pregnancy Why treat cold sores?

Although cold sores commonly occur during pregnancy, they are generally not thought to affect the unborn baby. Nonetheless, cold sores are uncomfortable and infectious, so it is advisable to treat. Cold sores that occur for the first time in a pregnancy (a primary herpes infection) are of more concern for the baby.

## Why treat genital herpes?

Genital herpes needs to be treated during pregnancy to reduce the risk of transferring the herpes virus to the baby. The highest risk to your baby is if your first episode of genital herpes occurs in your third trimester, as the virus may be transferred to the baby in the birth canal during a vaginal delivery.<sup>3</sup>

If you or a partner have had genital herpes in the past or you are having a first or recurrent episode during your pregnancy, it is important to tell your obstetrician, GP or midwife. Your doctor may prescribe aciclovir or valaciclovir tablets, even if you don't have a current outbreak, to prevent an episode occurring towards the end of the pregnancy. These medications are considered safe to use during all stages of pregnancy.<sup>3</sup> There is not sufficient information regarding the safety of other antiviral medicines, including famciclovir, during pregnancy.<sup>4</sup> If in doubt, call MotherSafe for specific medication advice.

If your doctor is worried about the risks to your baby, a caesarean birth may be recommended.<sup>3</sup>

## Medicines recommended

Cold sores are often treated with aciclovir cream which is a specific antiviral medication that is applied directly on the cold sores. If the cold sores are severe and/or painful, aciclovir or valaciclovir tablets may be prescribed by your doctor. These medications are considered safe to use during all stages of pregnancy and breastfeeding.<sup>1</sup> There is not sufficient information regarding the safety of other medicines, including famciclovir, during pregnancy and breastfeeding.<sup>4</sup> If in doubt, call MotherSafe for specific medication advice.

Lysine tablets are often used to prevent or treat cold sores. There is little scientific data to support the use of lysine for this purpose and there is a lack of human follow-up data specifically in pregnancy. Nonetheless, it is not anticipated to be harmful in pregnancy or breastfeeding.<sup>5</sup>

Hydrocolloid patches, such as Compeed®, are absorbent dressings that are safe to use in pregnancy and breastfeeding. These dressings provide wound protection and discreet hiding of the cold sore.

## Breastfeeding and cold sores

Sometimes, HSV can cause serious problems for a baby, such as infections to the eyes and throat, damage to the nerves and in rare cases, can be life-threatening. A newborn baby can be infected with HSV from a kiss or a touch by someone with cold sores, or during vaginal birth (if you have a genital sore at the time of delivery).<sup>3</sup>

Cold sores occur commonly around the time of delivery, so it is important to treat cold sores quickly to prevent transmission to a newborn baby. Aciclovir cream, and aciclovir or valaciclovir tablets are all considered safe while breastfeeding.<sup>6</sup> In general, outbreaks may heal sooner with tablets rather than cream. If uncertain, discuss with your doctor.<sup>7</sup>

If you have cold sores, it is safe to breastfeed your baby. However, if the cold sores are on your breast or nipple, you should temporarily stop breastfeeding from the affected breast until the cold sores have cleared up. You should express and dispose of the breastmilk from the affected breast, as breastmilk may be contaminated if it has been in contact with the cold sores.<sup>8</sup>

## How do I protect my baby from herpes infection?

If you, or anyone in close contact with the baby has a cold sore you can help avoid spreading the herpes virus to the baby using strict hygiene measures. These include covering the cold sore, avoiding kissing your baby until the sores have completely healed, avoiding touching cold sores with your hands and washing hands carefully before touching your baby.<sup>1</sup>

## References

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## Other resources

- Pregnancy Birth and Baby. Australian Government department of Health and Aging. Cold sores in pregnancy. Last reviewed: June 2023. Available at: <https://www.pregnancybirthbaby.org.au/cold-sores-in-pregnancy>
- MotherToBaby Fact sheet. Acyclovir (Zovirax)/ Valacyclovir (Valtrex). February 2024. Available at <https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/acyclovir-zoviraxvalacyclovir-valtrex-pregnancy/>
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