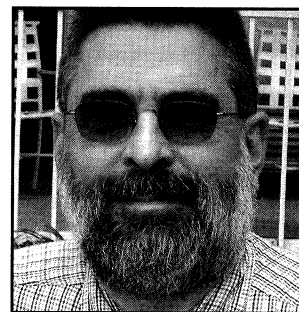


Bears & Health

Hibernation & Herpes, part one



Winter is passing. Bears are emerging from their hibernations, just as certain other creatures, among them herpes viruses, may be beginning theirs. During winter we typically get "colds." Because most colds are caused by viruses, which can suppress immunity, colds can facilitate other infections, one of the most familiar of which is the classic "cold sore" or "fever blister" caused by herpes simplex virus (HSV), and otherwise known as herpes labialis or oral herpes. HSV, as most of you know, is a sexually transmitted disease (STD).

Not long ago, I did a 2-part feature on the latest epidemic to hit the gay community – a very serious one that continues to rage out of control: crystal meth. And the main reason it's so serious is that it's causing the rates of new cases of HIV in gay men to rise sharply. Crystal is the newest and probably the worst of the co-factors now for getting HIV, but there are others, the greatest of these being other drug abuse (e.g., alcohol, cocaine, pills) and STD's. It stands to reason that if you're intoxicated, whatever the drug(s), your judgment isn't going to be as good and you're more likely have high-risk sex. Sores or erosions from syphilis or gonorrhea or herpes on your penis or on or in your anus or mouth can also facilitate transmission of HIV.

Herpes is believed to affect about 45 million people nationwide, and has seemed a bigger problem among straights than gays. Why? Genital herpes is more common in women than in men, but the main reason is because of the dangers of infection for the fetus in a pregnant mother. For most of us, her-

pes is mostly a vexation. The sores, which typically emerge – and re-emerge in the same spots – on the lips and genitals, but which can appear almost anywhere else on the skin or mucous membranes, can be painful and recurrent, sometimes frequently. But they don't cause much other gross illness in otherwise healthy men and women. In babies, however, herpes infections can be fatal.

So prevention of herpes infection during pregnancy is an urgent consideration for women and couples who plan to have children. But in view of the risk of facilitating transmission of HIV as well as causing more serious infections in those who already have HIV and are immunocompromised, herpes can also be an urgent concern among gay men.

The signs and symptoms of herpes vary greatly. Herpes sores are usually easily recognizable as such, and most of those who have cold sores or genital herpes may never have had biopsies or other confirmatory tests. But for an initial outbreak, confirmatory tests – biopsy, viral culture, blood serology – are important since herpes sores can be confused with other lesions.

There are two principle types of HSV: HSV-1, which can cause genital herpes, but which more commonly causes oral herpes. HSV-1, while not always the cause of observable disease, infects nearly 80 percent of the U.S. population. HSV-2 is more commonly associated with genital herpes. But if a person with HSV-1 has an active cold sore and has oral sex, the partner can acquire genital herpes and vice versa for the partner who has HSV-2.

Like bears, herpes "hibernates"; that is, it becomes dormant between outbreaks. The virus is most infectious, communicable, during outbreaks. And so **the greatest safety measure you can take is to avoid having or allowing any direct contact with the sore, which contains active virus, when a sore is present, whether you or your partner is the one with the sore. If that hot bear you're having casual sex with has a cold sore on his lip or what looks like a sore on his penis, it's probably herpes. The problem is that herpes outbreaks can be "subclinical" (not obvious), especially if they're in places where they can't be as easily seen, like around or inside the anus or vagina or mouth. A burning pain is common with herpes sores, but pain awareness is variable. All the more reason to use protection – selective abstinence and condoms. But not lambskin condoms, which may be more porous to the virus.**

A positive serology for HSV-2 suggests genital herpes, especially in someone with no known previous history of herpes. Especially for a first outbreak, the diagnosis should be confirmed by a health care provider.

In Part 2, we will review transmission and discuss recurrences, testing, treatment and prevention.

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