

Herpes blood tests (serology)

How can people find out if they have genital herpes?

Most people who have genital herpes do not have symptoms that they recognize. If symptoms of genital herpes do appear, those symptoms can vary widely from person to person. Small painful blisters that change to ulcers (open areas) are typical, but bumps, scratches, and other minor skin changes may also be signs of herpes infection.

If a person does experience visible symptoms, we recommend obtaining a **culture test** from the possibly infected skin **within the first 48 hours after symptoms appear**. Beyond 48 hours, there is a risk of receiving a false negative culture test result because symptoms may have begun to heal and there are not enough viruses left on the skin to grow in culture.

Blood tests can be used when a person has no visible symptoms but has concerns about having herpes. Blood tests do not actually detect the virus; instead, they look for antibodies (the body's immune response) in the blood. Antibodies do not appear until weeks after the initial infection occurred. A positive antibody test does not tell you what part of the body was infected (e.g., genital, oral, or other). Antibody tests are thought to remain positive for the person's entire life.

For the most accurate result, it is recommended to wait at least 12 - 16 weeks from the last possible exposure to herpes before getting a blood test to allow enough time for antibodies to develop. Sometimes it is appropriate to test at the time when symptoms first appear to find out whether the person had previously (i.e., more than several weeks ago) become infected with herpes.

Because both herpes type-1 and herpes type-2 can infect the genital area, the blood test used at UVa Student Health (HerpesSelect Immunoblot™) detects both types. But the blood test cannot distinguish between genital and non-genital sites of infection. **That means that a person who has a positive blood test result does not know whether they have genital herpes or herpes at another body site.** If individuals have typical herpes symptoms at a given site, they most likely have herpes there. **But they may also have herpes at another site, even if they do not have symptoms at that site.**

Talk with your health care provider if you think a herpes test might be helpful for you.