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## Women twice as likely to contract genital herpes as men

First Australia-wide study reveals women are at higher risk of contracting Type 2 herpes infections.

Australian women are twice as likely as men to contract Type 2 herpes simplex virus (HSV-2), according to a recent study\* conducted by leading medical experts in the field on sexual health.

The reasons for this are not yet clear, but one explanation may be that the anatomies of women make them more susceptible to the infection.

HSV-2 is one of the two most common sexually transmitted infections in Australia, with approximately one in eight people (about 12%) affected with it. It is very common for people to unknowingly pass on the virus to a partner because they don't experience symptoms and/or they're unaware of carrying the virus - 80% of those who have genital herpes don't know they have it. On the other hand, HSV-1, the Type 1 virus responsible for oral cold sores, can be transmitted to genitals through oral sex. Both HSV-1 and HSV-2 are easily treatable and manageable. There are simple daily treatments for genital herpes that are proven to reduce outbreaks and may reduce transmission.

"This is the first study of its type in Australia and has identified some important insights into HSV-1 and 2 infection rates around the country," said Adrian Mindel, Professor of Sexual Health Medicine, University of Sydney and Director of the Sexually Transmitted Infections Research Center, Westmead Hospital.

"It is not surprising that women have a higher seroprevalence than men due to their physiology and anatomy. As women are more likely to be HSV positive, it is important for those who are sexually active and have had multiple partners get tested for genital herpes."

Other findings showed that in Australia, 76%\*\* of the population has HSV-1 antibodies. Although Australia has a relatively low HSV-2 infection rate compared with some countries, HSV-1 seroprevalence in Australia is higher than the United States and many countries in Europe.

The study, which focused on individuals over the age of 25, revealed that HSV-2 is most prevalent between the ages of 35 and 44, with individuals in metropolitan areas having higher rates of infection than counterparts in rural areas. Worth noting are the high rates of HSV-2 infection within Indigenous communities (18%) when compared to non-indigenous (12%). Reducing the high rate of STIs in some

\* *"Prevalence of Infection with herpes simplex virus types 1 and 2 in Australia: a nationwide population based survey"* written by A L Cunningham and J Taylor of the Westmead Millennium Institute, J Taylor of The School of Public Health, A Mindel and C Marks Sexually Transmitted Infections Research Centre and The University of Sydney and J Shaw of the International Diabetes Institute. Published in the Sexually Transmitted Infections 2006 volume 82 pages 65 -68

\*\* The seroprevalence of HSV-1 was 76% with significant difference by age group, sex and Indigenous studies.



Aboriginal communities was highlighted as a major objective in the recently released *National Sexually Transmissible Strategy 2005 – 2008*.

Previous studies have also shown that HSV-2 occurs in: up to 75% of patients attending STI clinics, 24 – 87% of men who have sex with men; and 74 -98% of female sex workers.

These are the first nationwide data collected with regard to HSV in Australia and will be important for future development and deployment of a genital herpes vaccine.

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#### **About AHMF**

The Australian Herpes Management Forum (AHMF) is Australia's leading independent organisation providing evidence-based information and resources about herpes viruses. The AHMF is based at the Sexually Transmitted Infections Research Centre at Sydney's Westmead Hospital. The AHMF is principally sponsored by GlaxoSmithKline with supporting sponsorship from Novartis.

For accurate, up-to-date information, education and support, visit [www.ahmf.com.au](http://www.ahmf.com.au).

#### **For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact**

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