

# FACT SHEET NO: 3 Herpes

Thanks to the GMHC for the Herpes fact sheet

## What is herpes?

Herpes is the name of a family of viruses. Herpes viruses cause different infections and diseases in many people, whether or not they have HIV. The viruses can cause cold sores, fever blisters, genital sores, chickenpox and shingles. Cytomegalovirus (CMV) is another type of herpes that can cause serious illness in people with AIDS.

## What are the signs of herpes?

If you have had any of these signs, you should see your doctor right away.

**Herpes Simplex Virus I:** People with herpes simplex I get cold sores or fever blisters around the mouth or nose that last for a few days to a few weeks. Other symptoms may include fever, fatigue, swollen glands and muscle pain. These signs can be considerably more severe and longer lasting in people with HIV.

**Herpes Simplex Virus II:** People with herpes simplex II break out from time to time with painful sores on the genitals or anus. They sometimes feel like they have the flu before and during an outbreak. Once again, symptoms can be considerably more severe and longer lasting in people with HIV.

**Herpes Zoster** (better known as Shingles): People with shingles get a painful skin rash that usually starts as fluid-filled blisters on one side of the body. The same virus that causes chickenpox causes shingles. It is really a reactivation of an old chickenpox infection that occurred many years before. Shingles outbreaks result from a decline in the body's immunity, such as from aging or HIV.

## Can herpes infections be treated?

Yes, these infections can be treated, but the virus cannot be killed, just held down. Starting treatment for an outbreak of herpes simplex I or II within six weeks of

the first signs can help it go away faster. Herpes simplex and shingles are usually treated with a medicine called acyclovir, taken as pills or used as an ointment. The brand name version of this drug (Zovirax) is very expensive (R30 per day for 5-10 days), but generic versions by Ranbaxy and Aspen Pharmaceur are much more affordable. Other medicines effective for herpes include Valtrex and Famvir.

## Can herpes infections be prevented?

Taking regular smaller doses of acyclovir may prevent reactivation of old herpes infections. But casual use of acyclovir can breed herpes viruses resistant to the drug. Ask your doctor if preventive medication is necessary for you.

Herpes simplex I and II spread very easily when sores are present. Herpes I and II sores can also spread between the mouths and genitals of different individuals during oral sex. Sometimes people have the herpes viruses but don't show any symptoms. These people can still spread the herpes viruses to others. Condoms reduce the chances of transmission during sex. To keep herpes infections from spreading to other parts of your body, do not scratch or irritate fever blisters, and see your doctor as soon as you notice an outbreak.

Many people think that herpes simplex outbreaks are related to emotional stress. Practicing stress-reduction techniques may also help prevent reactivation of old herpes infections. There is some good news. Frequently, herpes simplex infections become less and less intense each time they reappear and may disappear over time on their own.

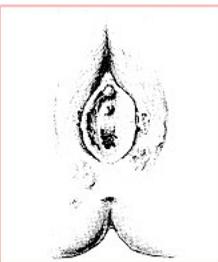
As for shingles, if you have never had chickenpox, you should avoid contact with someone who has shingles. A vaccine for chickenpox is available. Check with your doctor to see if this vaccine is right for you.



## Why herpes should be treated

Herpes is important in the HIV epidemic for at least three reasons: first, herpes is a common opportunistic infection in people with HIV/AIDS. Second, herpes causes genital ulcers, which makes HIV transmission easier. Third, there are indications of a higher concentration of HIV virus in untreated herpes lesions (ulcers), increasing HIV transmission risks. A recent study conducted in South Africa showed a strong association between HIV and herpes and concluded that herpes could play a major role in the spread of HIV...

Treating herpes can help prevent the transmission of HIV. Therefore, for moral and public health reasons, every effort should be made to detect and treat people infected with herpes.



## An evaluation of the Pfizer donation

By Zamu Zwane

On April 1 2000 Pfizer announced a donation of Fluconazole (under the Pfizer brand name of Diflucan) to the South African government. In the following months nothing happened. Due to the enormous pressure brought by TAC and a number of international organizations, particularly *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) Pfizer finally signed an agreement with the SA government to donate Diflucan on 1 December 2000. TAC demanded that Pfizer reduce the price of Fluconazole to R440 a capsule or issue a voluntary license to the SA government to buy cheaper generic anti-retroviral drugs from other countries. TAC has twice submitted the generic Fluconazole, known as *Biozole* from Thailand for tests at independent laboratories.

The first batch of Pfizer's Diflucan arrived in March 2001 nearly a year after the donation was announced. In that waiting period TAC lost five volunteers due to illnesses that could have been treated with Fluconazole. Undoubtedly, many other people also died in this period. With an immediate price reduction by Pfizer many more lives could have been saved. Pfizer's donation was intended to prevent such a price reduction. Today, Diflucan still costs about R70 per capsule at your local chemist and the generic versions are still not available.

TAC supports the Diflucan partnership in their efforts to distribute Diflucan in all nine provinces. The drug is now available in many hospitals and patients with cryptococcal meningitis (which attacks the brain) and oesophageal candidiasis can access it.

The donation has some serious shortcomings which are causing suffering and loss of life. The main problem is that the Diflucan may not be used in certain common cases where it should in fact be used. For example, the donation does not include paediatric prescription.

TAC believes the donation is essentially a greedy attempt to make a maximum profit in the dying days of Pfizer's patent on the drugs. TAC also believes that there remains a moral and a legal right to defy Pfizer's Diflucan patent, and to ensure the people

who are benefiting from the Pfizer donation also have access to essential generic brands of Fluconazole such as *Biozole* and others.

Since May 2001 TAC set up Diflucan Watch to monitor the programme. In the process many things were picked up. Firstly there are no national standard guidelines that instruct the general

hospitals to distribute Diflucan to their feeder clinics. The drug is also not equally accessible in all provinces and availability depends on the commitment of the Health Department in each province. Some hospitals have received the stock others have not. For example, in hospitals like Umntata General and most hospitals in Johannesburg the Diflucan is available but there is no commitment to distribute it to their feeder clinics. People in the Eastern Cape and in the Northern Province also have to travel long distances to the general hospitals — only to find that some of the hospitals do not have these drugs — denying some people access to medicine that could save their lives.

There is also no public campaign to make patients and health care providers aware of the donation. Most PWAs still go to private doctors and pay private rates, which are approximately R70 a capsule.

TAC calls for:

• A review of the Pfizer donation agreement, the reduction of prices and that PWAs and Aids Service Organisations should participate in all negotiations that directly affect them  
• The reduction of prices for all medicines used for the treatment of PWA's

• AIDS service organisations to participate in all negotiations that directly affect them without conditions by government or the companies.

## Equal Treatment is sponsored by:

The Treatment Action Group  
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The AIDS Consortium

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this newsletter, TAC strongly urges you to consult your doctor about any medical inquiry. The medical information provided here is for educational use and should not be used for diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions.

Please send any comments or suggestions to TAC at the email address or telephone numbers below:

<b>Cape Town</b> Town One Properties Submi Drive, Site B Klayelisha tel 021 364 5489 fax 021 364 5489	<b>Durban</b> 717 Colonial Bldg 330 West St. Durban, 4001 tel 031 304 3673 fax 031 301 9743	<b>Johannesburg</b> PO Box 31104 Braamfontein, 2017 tel 011 403 7021 fax 011 403 2106
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www.tac.org.za • info@tac.org.za



Produced by: Community Health Media Trust CHMT  
CHMT Collective: Theminkosi Mtsheni, Eduard Grebe  
Jack Lewin, Bongive Mkhutshwa  
Design: Daryll Cotton 082 379 2294  
Repro: Martingraphics 023 448 1449  
Printing: Salyprint 021 448 5620