

Latest WHO estimates indicate more than half a billion have HSV-2

One sentiment that we often hear at the Herpes Resource Center from people newly diagnosed with genital herpes is this: “I feel like I’m alone.” As a recently released report by the World Health Organization (WHO) indicates, this couldn’t be further from the truth. According to WHO estimates, more than half a billion people worldwide are infected with herpes simplex virus 2—a figure that amounts to about 16 percent of the total global population.

The WHO report is the first to systematically examine the global scope of HSV-2 infection. Data gathered from hundreds of studies determined



prevalence and incidence of HSV-2 in 12 global regions. In the final analysis, the report estimated that approximately 536 million people between the ages of 15 and 49 were living with HSV-2 in 2003.

Overall, more women than men were infected with HSV-2, with 315 million women compared to 221 million men. However, in some regions, including the Pacific, southeast Asia and south Asia for older groups and north Africa and the Middle East for younger groups, prevalence rates for men were higher. Prevalence also increased with age, with a peak in the 34-39 age group.

While prevalence was generally higher in developing countries, there were some exceptions. Among these was North America, with a relatively high prevalence. The lowest prevalence among the 12 regions was Western Europe, with prevalence reaching a maximum of 18 percent among women and 13 percent among men. The region with the highest was sub-Saharan Africa, with prevalence reaching a maximum of 70 percent among women and 55 percent among men.

Incidence rates for 2003 reflect the same gender difference. Of the estimated 23.6 million new HSV-2 infections in 2003, approximately 12.8 were women and 10.8 million were men. While gender differences in infection rates have been found in previous studies, the authors of the WHO report indicate that the reasons for this are unclear. They suggest that, as with other

sexually transmitted infections, anatomical differences may leave women more susceptible to infection. Additionally, they indicate that the distribution of sexual risk behaviors between men and women may also contribute to this uneven distribution.

While this first attempt to measure global herpes prevalence and incidence is valuable, the data necessarily reflect the wide variability of studies across the globe. As the authors state, “No matter how sophisticated the statistical methods used to produce them, estimates are only as good as the data from which they are calculated.” Nevertheless, these estimates provide a framework to develop public health policy and target educational and prevention efforts across the globe.

Herpes: By the Numbers

563 million

people infected with HSV-2 worldwide

50 million

people with HSV-2 in the United States.

90%

The approximate percentage of the 50 million people in the U.S. who have genital herpes.

50-80%

of the U.S. adult population with HSV-1, the most common cause of oral herpes.

10-20%

The percent of days that HSV-2 can be found in the genital tract of those with genital herpes.

48%

The percentage reduced risk of transmission to an uninfected partner if the infected partner uses condoms.

2-12

The number of weeks it takes for detectable antibodies to develop (and be detected by a type-specific test).

48

The number of hours after an appearance of a lesion that a culture test can be done for it to be most reliable.

1

(day)

The shortest dose of episodic treatment that one needs to take (famciclovir 1000 mg orally twice daily for 7 days).

Less than 0.1%

The percent of babies born in the United States each year that contract neonatal herpes.

50%

The decrease in the risk of transmission by knowing that your partner has genital herpes.

80%

The percent of people with newly acquired genital herpes who have had only one partner in the last month.