Genital herpes is a common sexually transmissible infection (STI) caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). There are two types of HSV: HSV1 and HSV2. HSV1 is usually found around the lips and mouth and is often referred to as cold sores. HSV2 commonly infects the genital and anal areas. Both HSV1 and HSV2 can occur on the lips, mouth, genital or anal areas. It is possible for a person to be infected with both HSV1 and HSV2.

In Australia it is estimated that three-quarters of Australian adults are infected with HSV1, and one in ten adults with HSV2. Women are more likely to be infected with HSV2 than men.

HSV enters the body through the skin on the mouth, genitals and anus or small cuts in the skin elsewhere on the body. The virus lives in the nerves beneath the skin and may remain inactive and unnoticed for many years.

It is not completely understood what causes the virus to activate and cause blisters. Isolated factors such as, menstruation (periods), emotional upset and sexual activity have been known to trigger an episode. Sunburn can also trigger a herpes episode (or cold sore) on the face or lips.