Turning Herpes Off

Findings uncover a genetic process that may lead to a cure for herpes.

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Scientists recently identified a mechanism that may explain why the herpes virus—known to cause cold and genital sores and sometimes life-threatening infections in newborns—can remain dormant and then reactivate.

According to the World Health Organization, 3.7 billion people under age 50 have herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1), better known as oral herpes. An estimated 417 million individuals between 15 and 49 have genital herpes, or herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2).

The herpes virus tends to conceal itself in nerve cells, emerging months or years later to reactivate infection. This has made treating and finding an effective vaccine or cure for this contagious virus quite challenging for scientists.

Researchers have now learned that the virus switches between a latent, or dormant, stage of inactivity and a lytic, or active, stage, during which the virus replicates.

Scientists believe that chromatin—a DNA and protein bundle in cells—plays a major role in whether the herpes virus turns on or off. If the chromatin bundle is tightly packed, then herpes stays off. However, if the genetic material is loosely packed, then the virus turns on, triggering an outbreak.

This discovery could help researchers understand exactly how the virus reactivates and aid in the development of antiviral drugs or vaccines that could stop a herpes outbreak or one day cure the disease.

In the meantime, home remedies can help treat inflammation, irritation and other symptoms caused by HSV-1 or HSV-2 outbreaks. For example, a warm or cold compress can minimize pain and swelling from herpes sores, and cornstarch and baking soda paste can help dry out lesions and relieve itching.

Research has also shown that a change in diet could boost one’s immune system, which in turn reduces outbreaks. In addition, eating salmon, mackerel and other foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids can help the immune system fight chronic inflammatory conditions, such as herpes.

Finally, a diet high in protein, vitamin C and zinc can also accelerate healing following an outbreak and decrease future outbreaks.

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