

Dating and the H Bomb!

By Jeannie May



In this new era of rampant Sexually Transmissible Infections (STIs) a new dating code is emerging to complicate the already muddy waters of relationship etiquette, from asking about previous partners to insisting on sexual health checks before embarking on a sexual relationship and, for the millions affected by the Herpes virus, deciding when to drop the H Bomb!

Having 'the talk', informing your prospective sexual partner about your Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV) status, explaining about the Herpes virus, the risks involved and the necessary precautions can mean the end of a potential relationship—it can be the moment when you literally 'Bomb out!'

With eight in 10 Australians affected by HSV 1 (oral cold sores) and two in 10 affected by HSV 2 (genital herpes), dropping the H Bomb is becoming a more common occurrence. Choosing the 'right' moment can be difficult at best, obviously it is better to discuss this before you become intimate, but broaching the subject too soon can also cause difficulties.

Jared: *If you 'tell' on the first date, it sounds like you're saying right away that this is only about sex, or that you are 'expecting' this date to develop into a sexual encounter.*

Angie: *I don't tell them on the first date, I like to wait until I know that there might be something worth developing before I give them the facts. Then I let them make the decision whether to explore the relationship further or not.*

It's essential that you choose your moment well, be prepared with leaflets and information available, and approach the whole topic in a calm and caring manner.

Rick: *I was really touched by Gayle's honesty, it showed how much she cared about me and how important our*

relationship was to her. I know it took a lot of courage for her to tell me and I respect her tremendously for that.

Gayle: *I tried to tell him calmly but there were a few tears spilled as I tried to get the story out. My ex-boyfriend never told me, although he certainly knew that he had it, and that has always had a great effect on me, I felt totally betrayed by his lack of honesty or compassion.*

Discovering you have contracted an incurable STI can be very difficult to come to terms with, not only are there health issues to deal with, but very often there are trust and betrayal issues to surmount as well. Then, there's the most difficult issue of all, the grim social stigma associated with having Herpes, which can lead to people keeping it a secret, denying it, avoiding relationships, suffering depression and even believing that they can no longer live a normal life.

Angie: *I was totally devastated when I found out. I just kept thinking "Why me?" It just seemed so unfair!*

Jared: *For a long time I believed that I would never date again. I mean, how could I ever tell anyone about this, and how could I ever have a relationship and not tell? I thought I would never be intimate with anyone again for the rest of my life!*

Maree: *I felt so alone! I couldn't talk to anyone about it, not even my closest friends.*

Herpes is often seen as a taboo topic and while it remains so the accompanying social stigma will continue to haunt Herpes sufferers. The Herpes virus does not distinguish between good and bad, moral and immoral, young and old, straight, bisexual or gay. It affects people of all ages, from all walks of life and in all types of relationships.

Garth: *I was a wreck until I found an internet support group. Finally there was someone I could talk to about it. People just like me who were going through all the same things I was. That really helped me come to terms with it.*

Alicia: *I told my Mum! We've always been very close and it was impossible to keep this from her. She knew immediately that something was up. I felt so ashamed, expecting her to be disappointed in me but she opened up about her encounter with crabs in her younger years and*

about how many people she knew who get cold sores—and this really is the same thing, it's just in another location.

Education and support are the keys to acceptance of Herpes. Once you accept that Herpes is a condition, like diabetes, which can be controlled with medication, then you are well on your way to developing your own personal health management plan.

David: *I very rarely have outbreaks so I only take medication when I feel one coming on, often during stressful periods, like relationship dramas or around exam times.*

Angie: *My doctor didn't even prescribe meds for me, told me it was just cold sores and not to worry too much about it. I went through hell that first year, finally finding out about suppressive treatment changed my life! I felt human again!*

Jared: *Catching Herpes was like a wake-up call for me. I have a pretty high stress job which I used to allow to rule my life. Knowing that stress can bring on an outbreak I have changed my work style. I have a far more relaxed attitude to work now. I know that I can do it so I just choose not to stress over it anymore.*

Coming to terms with Herpes can often be easier within a relationship environment because of the continual support available, but even those in relationships may one day find themselves playing the dating game again at some time in the future. Rejoining the singles scene post Herpes can be a traumatic experience. Fear of rejection leads many to avoid social situations and to dread being 'fixed up' by friends.

Angie: *When I began dating again I only wanted to date fellow Herpes sufferers, I didn't want to think about the possibility of my ever being responsible for passing this virus on to someone else. I met a guy who changed my attitude completely, he told me that I could be denying someone the opportunity of loving me and I should never do that. Everyone deserves the chance to love whom they choose, no matter what.*

Corinne: *Not everyone is mature enough to handle this situation and I consider my rejections to be for the best—after all, what kind of a person rates someone's desirability and worth on the presence of a little virus?*

Attitudes are changing, acceptance and understanding is growing daily. There are thousands of sites on the internet offering information, advice and support. There are also a growing number of HSV-positive dating sites catering to people with Herpes.

But hey, if you want to know the best way to avoid catching Herpes get involved with someone who already has it! Because they are usually well informed about the virus and are prepared to take the necessary precautions to prevent you from contracting it. So don't ever let it stop you from embarking on a relationship, there are many far more important things which determine compatibility levels—and love doesn't take any of them into consideration anyway!

Further information

Suggested internet sites:

www.ahmf.com.au

www.herpess.com.au

www.thefacts.com.au

For Herpes peer support check the internet for Herpes Support groups. The most active online Australian Support Group is Herpes Hangout <http://au.groups.yahoo.com/group/herpeshangout>. This group has initiated and organised Australia's First National Herpes Gathering—Hevent 2003, being held in Adelaide, September 19–21. The focus of the gathering is on support, friendship and fun. For more info see the website: <http://au.geocities.com/hevent2003>

Jeannie May is one of the organisers of Hevent 2003—Australia's First National Herpes Gathering and is working on a book about coming to terms with Herpes, a collection of real life experiences.