How well do antivirals shorten genital herpes pain duration?

**Evidence-Based Answer**

A review of 3 double-blind, placebo-controlled RCTs compared topical, oral, and IV acyclovir in patients with a first episode of genital herpes.1 Researchers recruited a total of 138 patients and randomized them to receive either placebo or one of the following: oral acyclovir (200 mg 5 times daily for 10 days), IV acyclovir (5 mg/kg dose, 3 times daily for 5 days), or 5% topical acyclovir in polyethylene glycol (4 times daily for 6 days).

All treatments shortened duration of pain compared with placebo: oral (3 days vs 7 days, P<.01), IV (5 days vs 9 days, P<.05), and topical (5 days vs 7 days, P<.05).

A subsequent RCT with 50 patients found that adding topical acyclovir to oral acyclovir was no more effective than oral acyclovir alone.2

**Evidence summary**

A review of 3 double-blind, placebo-controlled RCTs compared topical, oral, and IV acyclovir in patients with a first episode of genital herpes.1 Researchers recruited a total of 138 patients and randomized them to receive either placebo or one of the following: oral acyclovir (200 mg 5 times daily for 10 days), IV acyclovir (5 mg/kg dose, 3 times daily for 5 days), or 5% topical acyclovir in polyethylene glycol (4 times daily for 6 days).

All treatments shortened duration of pain compared with placebo: oral (3 days vs 7 days, P<.01), IV (5 days vs 9 days, P<.05), and topical (5 days vs 7 days, P<.05).

A subsequent RCT with 50 patients found that adding topical acyclovir to oral acyclovir was no more effective than oral acyclovir alone.2

**Oral acyclovir, valacyclovir, and famciclovir work equally well**

Head-to-head trials comparing acyclovir with valacyclovir or famciclovir show no difference in decreased duration of pain caused by primary genital herpes. An RCT of 643 adults found valacyclovir (1000 mg twice daily for 10 days) to be as effective and well-tolerated as acyclovir (200 mg 5 times daily for 10 days).3 An RCT of 951 adults demonstrated that famciclovir (250 mg 3 times daily for either 5 or 10 days) worked as well as acyclovir (200 mg 5 times daily for 10 days).4

**General treatment measures**

Expert opinion recommends the following general treatment measures for genital herpes lesions: keeping the affected area clean and dry, wearing dry, loose-fitting clothing and cotton underwear, and not touching the lesions. Additional symptomatic treatments for local pain include ice packs, baking soda compresses, warm baths, oral analgesics, topical anesthetics, and drying the affected area with cool air.5-8

**CAM approaches lack evidence of efficacy**

A 2005 nonsystematic review of available sci-
entific data on complementary and alternative medicine found a lack of evidence or conflicting evidence concerning the use of aloe vera, echinacea, L-lysine, bee products (honey pollen), zinc, and eleuthero for the treatment of pain in genital herpes.9

Recommendations
Clinical practice guidelines recommend prescribing oral antiviral therapy for patients with a first episode of genital herpes because patients with mild clinical findings at onset may develop severe or prolonged symptoms. Choices include a 7- to 10-day course of valacyclovir 1 g twice a day, famciclovir 250 mg 3 times a day, acyclovir 400 mg 3 times a day, or acyclovir 400 mg 5 times a day.5,10

The guidelines recommend treating patients with severe disease (such as disseminated infection, pneumonitis, hepatitis, or meningoencephalitis) with IV acyclovir (5-10 mg/kg every 8 hours for 2-7 days or until clinical improvement), followed by oral acyclovir for at least 10 days.5

References