

Cold Sores

Cold sores are small, blistering sores that occur on the face. They are caused by the Herpes simplex virus, the same virus that can cause genital herpes. Cold sores are a common infection that can be treated with medicines available from a pharmacist.

Signs and symptoms

Cold sores develop most commonly on or next to the lips. Occasionally they occur on the nostrils, on the chin or in the mouth.

There are four main stages of cold sore symptoms:

- Tingle – a tingling or burning feeling around the lips or nose, often up to two days before the cold sore appears
- Blisters – small, painful, fluid-filled blisters appear on a raised, red, painful area of skin. The blisters can last for a few days
- Weeping – the blisters open and fluid weeps out. The virus can easily be spread to other people at this stage
- Scab – the cold sore dries up and forms a scab, which can be itchy and painful. This heals in about seven days without leaving a scar.

Once a person has been infected with herpes simplex, they have it for life. After causing the first cold sore, the virus lies dormant in nerve cells in the skin (at or near the original site). A range of triggers (e.g., sunburn, menstruation, cold weather, fever, illness, some foods, stress, fatigue) can then re-activate the virus to cause another cold sore.

There is no permanent cure for cold sores, but staying relaxed and healthy may help to prevent their recurrence.

Medicines

A range of treatments are available for cold sores. Different stages and symptoms of a cold sore may require different treatments. Always ask a pharmacist or doctor for advice.



Antiviral medicines

(e.g., aciclovir, famciclovir, idoxuridine, penciclovir)

These medicines fight the cold sore virus and are the most effective treatment available. Antiviral cold sore creams are available from a pharmacist without a prescription. If cold sores are frequent or severe, tablet treatments can be prescribed by a doctor.

Antiviral medicines:

- Must be used according to the directions – always read the product information or Consumer Medicine Information
- Work best when used early – from the first tingle or sign of a cold sore
- May prevent a cold sore forming, if used early enough
- May speed healing of a cold sore
- May reduce the pain of a cold sore.

Other medicines

Other types of cold sore medicines can dry up the blisters and relieve itching and pain. Some products contain povidone-iodine, which can kill bacteria as well as the Herpes simplex virus. This may be helpful once a cold sore has reached the weeping stage, when a bacterial infection is likely to develop.

There is little scientific evidence that herbal or vitamin products help prevent or treat cold sores.

Self care

- If blisters have opened, keep the area clean and dry.
- The pain may be eased by applying ice or warm compresses to the blister.
- Follow the instructions carefully when using cold sore medication.
- Avoid getting cold sore cream in your eyes or inside your nose or mouth.
- Wash your hands before and after applying a cold sore medication.
- Avoid picking a cold sore at the scab stage, as this will delay healing and increase the risk of bacterial infection.
- Wear a wide brimmed hat and at least SPF 15+ sunscreen on your lips and face when in the sun. Sun protection will help prevent recurrence of cold sores.
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques to relieve stress.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including fruit, vegetables and whole grains. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Get enough sleep.
- Exercise regularly. The Heart Foundation recommends at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise on all or most days of the week.

Stop cold sores spreading

Cold sores are contagious. While you have a cold sore:

- Do not let other people touch your cold sore (e.g., kissing), or come into contact with fluid from the cold sore
- Do not touch or rub your eyes after touching the cold sore
- Do not share eating or drinking utensils, toothbrushes, towels, face cloths or razors

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

Important

The herpes cold sore virus can be passed on to other people from the time of the first tingle until the blisters have healed.

Avoid close contact with others while you have a cold sore. In particular, Herpes simplex infection can be dangerous for babies, people with eczema or burns and people with a weakened immune system.

Consult a doctor promptly if you:

- Have a cold sore that has not healed after 14 days
- Have a severe cold sore
- Have sores that spread rapidly or are widespread
- Get cold sores frequently
- Develop a high fever
- Also have another illness
- Take medicine which weakens your immune system
- Develop red, watery eyes that are sensitive to light – Herpes simplex virus can cause a very serious eye infection
- Develop sores in the genital area.

- Cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, because Herpes simplex can be spread by saliva
- Avoid any contact between cold sores or saliva and genital areas, to avoid the risk of genital herpes infection
- Wash your hands regularly and often, especially after touching your cold sore.

Related fact cards

- *Exercise and the Heart*
- *Relaxation Techniques*
- *Genital Herpes*
- *Vitamins*

For more information

A doctor – listed under 'Medical Practitioners' in the yellow pages of the phone book.

Australian Herpes Management Forum – website www.ahmf.com.au

Health/Insite – website www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacy Self Care Support – phone 1300 369 772 and ask for the Pharmacy Self Care Field Officer.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

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