

Cold sores

Cold sores are small, blistering sores that usually occur in or around the mouth. They are caused by the herpes simplex virus. Cold sores are a common infection that can be managed with medicines and other treatments available from a pharmacist.

There are two types of the herpes simplex virus:

- Type 1- usually causes cold sores
- Type 2- usually causes sores on your genitals (genital herpes).

Once you have a herpes simplex virus, it stays in your body for life. It may cause a cold sore (or other symptoms) at first, but then it usually lies 'asleep' (dormant) in your nerve cells. From time to time the virus can 'wake-up' (re-activate) and cause a cold sore. Cold sores usually first occur in childhood. They can be passed on by skin contact, such as a kiss from a family member who has a cold sore.

Triggers for cold sores

Some triggers that can re-activate the virus to cause a cold sore are sunlight, dry lips, damage to the lip or skin area, stress, tiredness, hormonal changes (e.g. menstruation) and illness (e.g. a cold).

Signs and symptoms

Most cold sores occur on or next to the lips. Sometimes they occur on the nose, on the chin or in the mouth. A person usually gets their cold sores in the same area each time.



There are usually four main stages of a cold sore:

- Tingle – a tingling, burning or itching feeling around the lips or nose, starting a few hours to a few days before the cold sore appears.
- Blisters – a red, painful lump appears which turns into small, painful, fluid-filled blisters. The blisters may last a few days.
- Weeping – the blisters burst and fluid weeps out.
- Scab – the cold sore dries up and forms a scab, which can be itchy and painful.

If not treated, cold sores usually heal within 7–10 days without leaving a scar.

How are cold sores spread?

Cold sores spread easily. A person can catch the herpes virus if their skin touches a cold sore, fluid from a cold sore, or saliva from a person who has the virus. A person with a cold sore may transfer the virus to another person or to another part of their own body (e.g. eyes or genitals). Sometimes the herpes virus can be passed on when no sore is present, because the virus may be lying dormant in saliva or the lips.

Treatment

There is no medicine that can cure cold sores. However, there are several treatment options that can be used. Different stages and symptoms of a cold sore may need different treatments. Ask a pharmacist, doctor or nurse for advice.

Antiviral medicines

Antiviral medicines can help to reduce the symptoms of a cold sore. Antiviral medicines are available in the form of tablets, capsules, cream and gel. You can get antiviral cold sore creams and tablets from a pharmacist without a prescription.

Antiviral medicines:

- must be used according to the directions; always read the Consumer Medicine Information leaflet
- work best when started at the first tingle or sign of a cold sore
- can speed healing of a cold sore
- can reduce the pain of a cold sore
- can prevent spreading of the cold sore to other regions.

Other cold sore products

Some other products which may help to manage cold sores are:

- creams to reduce itching, pain and inflammation.
- antiseptic ointments and paints to work against viruses and bacteria
- pain-relieving medicines (e.g. paracetamol, ibuprofen) to help reduce the pain
- cold sore patches to protect and speed up the healing process of the cold sore. These patches improve the aesthetic appearance of the cold sore by covering it.
- complementary medicine(s) (e.g. lysine).

Self care

- Try to find and avoid things that trigger your cold sores. Keep a diary to identify triggers.
- Follow the instructions carefully when using cold sore medicines.
- Do not break blisters or 'pick' a scab, as this will slow healing and increase the risk of bacterial infection.
- Hold an ice-cold compress on the cold sore – it may reduce the pain.
- Wear a wide brimmed hat and put sunscreen on your lips and face when in the sun.
- Learn and use relaxation techniques to reduce stress.
- Have a healthy diet. Eat a variety of vegetables, fruits, wholegrain/ wholemeal foods, protein-rich foods (e.g. nuts, lean meats, fish, eggs, beans) and low-fat dairy foods every day. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Get enough sleep.
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week.

Stop cold sores spreading

While you have a cold sore:

- Do not touch your cold sore except when applying a cold sore product.
- Do not let other people touch your cold sore, or your saliva (e.g. during kissing, hugging or sex).
- Do not touch your (or anyone else's) eyes or genitals after touching your cold sore.
- Do not share cold sore cream with others.

- Do not share eating or drinking utensils, toothbrushes, towels, face cloths, razors or lipstick.
- Cover your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing.
- Wash your hands often, especially before and after touching your cold sore.

Important

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

Get medical advice 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 more than three times a year
- also have a fever
- also have another illness
- take a medicine or have a medical condition that weakens your immune system
- get a cold sore near your eye, or a painful, red, watery eye that is sensitive to light. Herpes simplex virus can cause a very serious eye infection
- get sores in the genital area.

For more information

DermNet New Zealand

All about the skin

Website: www.dermnetnz.org

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthdirect.gov.au

NPS MedicineWise

Medicines Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets

Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 for expert advice

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

Related Fact Cards

- » *Genital herpes*
- » *Mouth ulcers*
- » *Pain relievers*
- » *Relaxation techniques*
- » *Vitamins*

Your Self Care Pharmacy:

The Pharmaceutical Society of Australia is committed to providing current and reliable health information.

This card was current at the time of publication.

© Pharmaceutical Society of Australia | www.psa.org.au