

# 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 managed with medicines and other treatments available from a pharmacist.**

## Signs and symptoms

Cold sores develop most commonly on or next to the lips. Sometimes they occur on the nose, on the chin or in the mouth. There are usually four main stages of a cold sore:

- Tingle – a tingling, burning or itching feeling around the lips or nose, from a few hours to 48 hours 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. 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
- Without treatment, cold sores usually take from one to three weeks to heal. They usually do not leave a scar.

Once a person has been infected with the cold sore virus, they have it for

life. The first infection usually occurs in childhood and may not cause any obvious symptoms. After the first infection, the virus remains in the body, lying inactive in nerve cells. A range of triggers (e.g., exposure to the sun, menstruation, cold weather, illness, some foods, stress, fatigue, rubbing) can re-activate the virus to cause a cold sore. Cold sores tend to occur again in the same place.

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

## Medicines

A variety of cold sore products is available. 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, penciclovir)

Antiviral medicines fight the re-activated herpes simplex virus. Antiviral cold sore creams are available from a pharmacist without a prescription. Antiviral tablet treatments can be prescribed by a doctor for frequent or severe cold sores.

Antiviral medicines:

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

### Other cold sore products

Other products which may help to manage cold sores include:

- Creams containing a medicine to relieve itching and pain
- Antiseptic ointments and paints which act against viruses and bacteria
- Cold sore wound patches
- Complementary medicines (e.g., lysine).

### Self care

- If blisters have burst, keep the area clean and dry.
- The pain may be eased by applying ice to the blister.
- Follow the instructions carefully when using cold sore medicines.
- Avoid getting cold sore product in your eyes or inside your mouth.
- Wash your hands before and after applying a cold sore product.
- Avoid breaking blisters or 'picking' a scab, as this will delay healing and increase the risk of bacterial infection.
- Try to identify and avoid things that trigger your cold sores.
- Wear a wide brimmed hat and at least SPF 15+ sunscreen on your lips and face when in the sun.
- Learn and use relaxation techniques to relieve stress.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including fruit, vegetables and grain foods. 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

The cold sore virus spreads through direct contact with a cold sore, or through contact with cold sore fluids or saliva from an infected person. An infected person may transfer the virus to another person or to another part of their own body. Cold sores are most infectious from the time symptoms appear until the blisters have completely dried. Sometimes the herpes virus can be passed on when no cold sore lesion is present.

While you have a cold sore:

- Avoid touching your cold sore except when applying a cold sore product
- Do not let other people touch your cold sore or come into contact with fluid from the cold sore (e.g., kissing, hugging)
- Do not touch your eyes after touching the cold sore (to avoid spreading the infection to your eyes)
- 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, as herpes simplex can be spread by saliva

### Important

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, people with a weakened immune system and pregnant women.

Seek medical advice 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
  - Also develop a fever
  - Also have another illness
  - Take a medicine or have a medical condition which weakens your immune system
  - Develop a painful, red, watery eye that is sensitive to light – herpes simplex virus can cause a very serious eye infection
  - Develop sores in the genital area.
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- 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.

## 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](http://www.ahmf.com.au)

### **New Zealand Dermatological Society Inc.**

Website: [www.dermnetz.org](http://www.dermnetz.org)

### **Healthdirect Australia**

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

### **Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)**

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### **National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information**

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### **The Poisons Information Centre**

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

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

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