

Herpes simplex (cold sores)

What is herpes simplex?

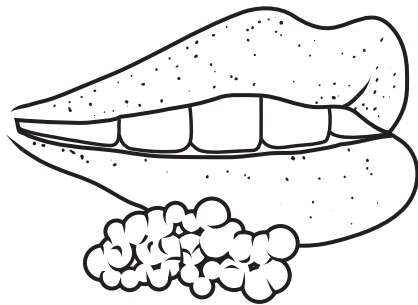
Herpes simplex (cold sores) is a viral infection of the skin that causes two types of infection:

1. the classical cold sores on the lips and around the mouth
2. genital cold sores, which are spread by sexual contact.

This pamphlet will consider cold sores on the face.

What are the symptoms?

This common infection is known also as 'fever blisters'. The first symptom is itchiness and tingling at the site of the developing infection, usually on the edge of the lips or the skin around the mouth, nose and chin. Blisters soon appear and later burst to become crusted sores which eventually dry up and fall off in about 10 days. The person usually feels unwell with fever and tiredness. The infection occurs only occasionally in some people but frequently in others.



Herpes simplex

How does herpes simplex develop?

The primary infection (gingivo-stomatitis) usually begins in childhood as a mouth infection with painful blisters inside the mouth and on the gums. The virus then lives in the nerves supplying the skin or eyes, waiting for an opportunity to become active. It may erupt on any area of the body's skin or in the eyes. The following may precipitate eruptions:

- overexposure to sunlight
- overexposure to wind
- colds, influenza and similar infections
- heavy alcohol use

- fever from any cause
- hormonal changes such as the menstrual period
- physical stress
- emotional stress.

Does it spread?

Herpes simplex is contagious. It is present in saliva of affected persons and can be spread in a family by the sharing of drinking and eating utensils and toothbrushes or by kissing. Follow hygienic procedures and keep blisters well covered with a dressing (if possible).

It is most important not to kiss an infant if you have an active cold sore.

Cold sores can spread to the eyes (which is serious) and other parts of the body.

Is herpes simplex dangerous?

It usually presents no serious risk, but it can be very unpleasant for patients who have eczema. It also can infect the eyes, and can cause a serious ulcer on the cornea.

Special care is needed in immunocompromised patients such as those with cancer or AIDS.

What is the treatment?

There is no cure or special treatment; most sores heal and clear in a few days. They should be kept dry: dabbing them with Betadine, plain alcohol or, better still, a solution of menthol in SVR alcohol, will relieve itching and help keep them clean and dry.

When you feel them developing, the application of an ice-cube to the site for up to 5 minutes every hour for the first 12 hours is soothing. Also, an antiviral ointment may help, but it must be applied early to be effective. Antiviral tablets may be prescribed for severe cases.

Avoid picking the scab or breaking the blisters.

Notify your doctor if you have a persistent fever, pus in the sores or irritation of an eye.

How can it be prevented?

Those prone to cold sores should avoid overexposure to sun and wind. If you cannot, apply 15+ sun protection lip balm or zinc oxide ointment around the lips and other areas where cold sores have erupted previously.