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 a cold sore:

• Tingle – a tingling, burning or itching feeling around the lips or nose, up to 48 hours before the cold sore appears

• Blisters – small, painful, fluid-filled blisters appear on a raised, red, painful area of skin. The blisters may last several 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 the cold sore virus, they have it for life. The initial infection usually occurs in childhood and may not cause any noticeable symptoms. After the initial infection, the virus remains in the body,
lying dormant in nerve cells. A range of triggers (e.g., sunburn, menstruation, cold weather, illness, some foods, stress, fatigue, trauma, rubbing) can re-activate the virus to cause a cold sore. Cold sores tend to recur in the same location.

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

**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 reactivated 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 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 cold sore products**

Some cold sore products contain medicines to relieve itching and pain and some contain an antiseptic which works against viruses and bacteria. An antiseptic may be helpful at the weeping stage, when the open blisters can become infected with bacteria. There is no conclusive 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 medicines.
- Avoid getting cold sore cream in your eyes or inside your mouth.
- Wash your hands before and after applying a cold sore medicine.
- 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 practice 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 fluid from a cold sore or saliva from an infected person. Cold sores are most contagious from the time symptoms appear until the blisters have completely dried, but 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
• Avoid any contact between cold sores or saliva and genital areas, to avoid the risk of genital herpes infection

**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.

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 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.

• Wash your hands regularly and often, especially after touching your cold sore.

To find your nearest Self Care pharmacy go to the pharmacy finder at www.psa.org.au
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

New Zealand Dermatological Society Inc.
Website: www.dermnetz.org

Healthdirect Australia
Phone: 1800 022 222
Website: 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

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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