

Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

Cold sores

Cold sores are annoying and can be painful. They heal after about a week. However, they usually come back from time to time. There are some treatments that may help severe cases.

What are cold sores?

Cold sores are blisters that appear on your lips and around your mouth. They are caused by a virus called herpes simplex. Cold sores are sometimes called herpes labialis or fever blisters.

There are two types of herpes simplex virus: 1 and 2. Type 1 mostly causes cold sores. Both types can cause sores or warts on the genitals. This information is for people who get sores on the mouth.

You can catch herpes simplex from other people, through their saliva. Most people are first infected as children.

Some children get quite ill when they are first infected. They may get ulcers inside their mouth and find swallowing painful. They may also have fever, swollen glands, bad breath, a poor appetite and little energy. If your child has these symptoms, take them to the doctor. Treatment may help.

Once you're infected, the virus stays in the nerves in your face. It can cause further cold sores at any time. Some things seem to trigger new attacks, including throat infections, tiredness and stress; your periods, if you are a woman; sunlight, and certain drugs, including steroids.

You can pass the virus onto other people through your saliva when you have cold sores. To reduce this risk, avoid kissing when you have cold sores and don't share cutlery and towels. Also, avoid oral sex when you have cold sores.

What are the symptoms?

Cold sores start as red patches and become small blisters. When the blisters burst, the skin becomes an open sore. Some people also get a fever. Your skin returns to normal in a week to ten days.

Some people get a tingling feeling on their lips about two days before their blisters appear.

What treatments work?

Cold sores usually clear up without any treatment in seven to 10 days. But there are some things you can try to help prevent and treat attacks.

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Things you can do yourself

If sunlight triggers your cold sores, it's worth trying **sunscreens** to protect your skin from the sun. There's some evidence that using sunscreens on your lips and mouth can reduce the chance of new cold sores.

You can buy **antiviral creams** at the chemist. They include **aciclovir** (Zovirax) and **penciclovir** (Vectavir). But the research isn't clear on how well antiviral creams work. They may help cold sores heal a bit more quickly. There's no evidence to show they prevent attacks. Antiviral creams can make your skin red and itchy.

Other creams are sometimes used for cold sores. These include **zinc oxide** (used to treat nappy rash) and the painkilling cream **tetracaine** (also called amethocaine). But there's no good evidence to show that they are helpful. Zinc oxide may irritate your skin.

Medicines

Doctors sometimes prescribe **antiviral** tablets for babies or children, if they get very bad cold sores. But most people don't need them because cold sores usually go away without causing problems. They are also prescribed for adults who have a weak immune system, for example, if they have HIV or cancer.

Doctors normally prescribe **aciclovir** (Zovirax). But alternatives include **famciclovir** (Famvir) and **valaciclovir** (Valtrex). Your doctor can prescribe them as a liquid, for babies or young children.

There is good research to show that antiviral tablets can help to treat cold sores. They can reduce pain and speed up healing.

Taking antiviral tablets just before symptoms appear (if you get signs like tingling) or as soon as symptoms appear can speed up recovery. This means that symptoms last a few days less than they would if you didn't have treatment.

These tablets have side effects. They can cause headache, nausea and diarrhoea. They can also cause an upset stomach, dry mouth and wind, but these side effects are less common.

What will happen to me?

Cold sores clear up without treatment in about 7 to 10 days. They don't leave a scar.

Most people who are infected with the herpes simplex virus get cold sores every year. 1 in 10 people get cold sores six or more times a year.

Herpes simplex can be serious if it spreads to your eyes, but this is rare.

People who have a weak immune system may get a more serious illness from herpes simplex. If you have a condition that means you have weak immune system, for example HIV or cancer, and you get symptoms of herpes simplex infection, you should see your doctor.

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