



Pharmaceutical  
Society of Australia



# 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 cold sore symptoms:

- Tingle – a tingling or burning feeling around the lips or nose, often up to two days before the cold sore appears
- Blisters – small, painful, fluid-filled blisters appear on a raised, red, painful area of skin. The blisters can last for a few 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) can reactivate the virus to cause a cold sore.

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

## Medicines

A range of treatments are available for cold sores. 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 can dry the blisters and relieve itching and pain. Some products contain an antiseptic such as povidone-iodine, which can kill bacteria and viruses. This 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 picking a cold sore at the scab stage, 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. Sun protection will help prevent cold sores recurring.
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques to relieve stress.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including fruit, vegetables and whole grains. 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 from person to person through skin-to-skin contact and through infected saliva. Cold sores are most contagious from the time the blisters appear until they 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:

- Do not let other people touch your cold sore (e.g., kissing), or come into contact with fluid from the cold sore
- Do not touch or rub your eyes after touching the cold sore (to avoid spreading the infection to your eyes)

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

## 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 medicine 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.

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

## Related fact cards

- *Genital Herpes*
- *Vitamins*
- *Relaxation Techniques*

## 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)

**HEALTHInsite** – website [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

**New Zealand Dermatological Society Inc.** – website [www.dermnetz.org](http://www.dermnetz.org)

**Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)** leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

**NPS Medicines Line** – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

**The Poisons Information Centre** – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

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

