

Cold sores

An independent guide from the **Herpes Viruses Association**,
41 North Rd, London N7 9DP Reg. charity 291657 Helpline: 0845 123 2305

What is a cold sore?

- A cold sore usually looks like a small blister or you may get a group of blisters.
- You may just get a shallow sore inside your mouth.
- You may get a tingling, itching or burning feeling in the area before the cold sore starts to develop.
- The area may also look slightly red before the blisters start to appear.
- The blisters burst and then begin to heal and scab.
- Moving your mouth or picking at the scab can cause it to crack or come off. Then it has to heal again. Keep the skin soft and moist and don't pick the scab.
- Cold sores normally go away on their own in about 7 to 10 days.
- Cold sores are very common. Lots of children and adults get them.

How did I get my cold sore?

You get it the first time by being kissed by someone who has cold sore on their lip. This may have been when you were too young to remember – or just the other day.

How is it passed on?

You pass it on by kissing someone when you have a cold sore or feel that one may be coming. If the other person catches it from you, their cold sore will appear on the bit of body you kissed. You can't give cold sores to someone who has already got them.

What causes a cold sore?

Cold sores are caused by germs called herpes simplex virus. There are two types of herpes simplex and type 1 is most likely

to the cause of a cold sore on the face.

When the cold sore comes back, have I caught it again?

No. You only catch the virus that causes a cold sore once. After the first sore has gone, the virus hides in your nerve cells and every now and then wakes up again and causes a cold sore.

Can I tell if a cold sore is coming back?

Usually, you will feel an itch or tingling in the area. About half of these warning signs do not develop into sores because your natural defences stop it.

Can a cold sore appear anywhere else?

A cold sore appears in the area you catch the virus. You will not spread sores to other parts of your body, but sometimes a new sore may appear on skin that is served by the same nerve. For example, the front of your face is one nerve region, so you may get a cold sore in the nose or on the chin. Your immune system will stop you from catching it again in a new place.



Can cold sores make you ill?

Most people don't notice when they catch this virus – they are not ill, they don't get cold sores. Some people may get a sore (ulcer) inside the mouth or throat. Some people may get a fever, a sore throat, headache and aching muscles.

A cold sore may appear some time later and then keep coming back (repeat cold sore). Repeat cold sores are usually smaller than the first and heal more quickly.

Can cold sores ever be serious?

People who have large areas of broken skin (such as when you have eczema - say 'ex-**zeema**'), or people who have a weak immune system (such people are more likely to get all sorts of infections) might sometimes get sores over a large area. These people will need to see a doctor as soon as possible.

What causes cold sores to come back?

Feeling tired, being unwell and bright sunlight can trigger a cold sore. Sometimes there are no obvious reasons.

What can I do to make cold sores less likely to come back?

- Get enough sleep
- Eat healthy food to keep your body working well
- Use a good quality sun block when you go out in the sun, particularly on the lips.

What treatments can help when a cold sore is starting up?

When you get the tingling feeling that tells you a cold sore is coming, try one of these:

- Use a herbal cream made with lemon balm mint. **Lomaherpan** is one. It can stop the virus from moving into the skin cells.
- Some people find aciclovir (say 'ah-**cycle**-oh-veer') cream, from the chemist, is helpful. It is best used when the tingling starts and can reduce the time you have a cold sore for. Always follow the instructions on the packet or leaflet that comes with the treatment. The evidence for this is low.
- Always wash your hands before and after applying cream to the area.

What can I do if it is very sore/itchy?

There is no scientific evidence for using these on cold sores, but many people find that gels which numb the skin can stop the

itching that you may have before the cold sore. They may also may help prevent a cold sore from developing.

You don't need a prescription for any of these - ask the chemist to check if he/she says otherwise. The first two are for 12 years and over, the others for everyone:

- Lypsyl cold sore gel
- Anbesol adult gel
- Lidocaine 5% ointment
- Teething gels are soothing and can also be used inside your mouth if there are ulcers. They can reduce discomfort.

What treatment can doctors offer?

Antiviral tablets may be prescribed for people with severe, frequently recurring cold sores.

Can I speed up healing?

No - there is not a lot that will help skin to heal more quickly.

- Don't pick at your scabs.
- To prevent scabs from cracking and coming off too soon, keep the skin soft and moist with an unscented product such as **Vaseline** ointment.

Don't be over-sensitive about your cold sores. They look bigger to you than they look to anyone else. If friends make fun of you when you have one, tell them they should be more considerate - they could have one next week. Insensitive friends can be as annoying as insensitive advertising. Ignore them both. Cold sores are usually trivial and unimportant.

The Herpes Viruses Association

For more information and tips to stop cold sores returning and help with dealing with cold sores in other parts of your body, visit our website at <https://herpes.org.uk> Last reviewed: 28-03-23 To be updated: 00/00/00

If you want more copies of this leaflet call us on 020 76079661 or email: info@herpes.org.uk