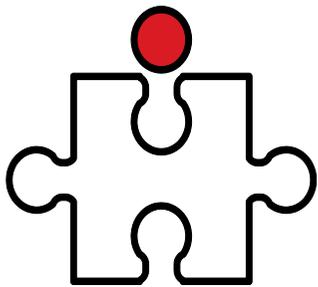


# Cold Sores

## The facts...

from the Herpes Viruses Association  
Registered charity no. 291657



### What causes cold sores?

Cold sores are caused by a herpes simplex virus. There are two types, called type 1 and type 2, and either type can be caught on any part of the body. Lips and genitals are the most common places we catch them.

This leaflet is about facial cold sores - which can also be called fever blisters, facial herpes or herpes labialis.

### How are cold sores caught and passed on?

You catch cold sores by being kissed by someone who has cold sore virus on their mouth - or by doing oral sex someone with 'genital cold sores' (genital herpes). You might have caught it the other day - or maybe

when you were a child, perhaps by being kissed by a relative.

Oral sex is also a common way of passing on cold sores from one person's mouth to another person's genitals (genital herpes) - or vice versa.

The virus can be caught on ordinary skin such as the hand/fingers if there is broken skin which can allow entry. It is called a whitlow on the fingers.

Cold sores are only caught by direct skin contact, with the affected area. They are not caught through sharing cups, cutlery, towels, lipstick, etc., (unless there is warm pus on the item). Experts are definite about this, though this fact is sometimes ignored by unreliable sources on the Internet and elsewhere.

You are very unlikely to give cold sores to someone who already gets them (no matter where on the body they get them).

### Does it make any difference which type you have?

On the face, herpes simplex type 1 is more likely to recur than type 2. So, if you are getting repeated cold sores, then you probably have herpes simplex type 1.

Some people have more frequent cold sores than others. This may depend partly on how good the genes you have inherited are at controlling the virus. If you are unlucky and get frequent sores, the life-style changes mentioned below might help.

### Will cold sores make me ill?

Sometimes, when you first catch a cold sore, you can have ulcers inside the mouth and throat as well as, or instead of, sores on the lips. You may have a fever and other flu-like symptoms. A painkiller can help: ibuprofen, paracetamol or aspirin.

Repeat cold sores (recurrences, flare-ups) will be on the edge of the lip, not inside the mouth.

### How common are cold sores?

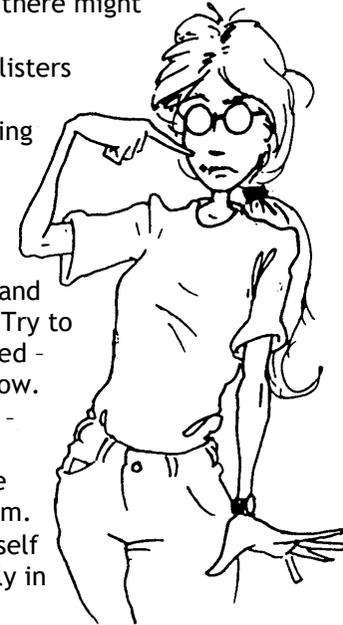
Cold sores are very common. In Britain, about seven in ten people have caught one of the viruses that cause them. However, most people don't know they

have caught them, as only one in three will notice symptoms.

Whichever herpes simplex type you have, you could also catch the second type in the same place or elsewhere on the body. Infection with a second type often goes unnoticed or the symptoms that appear may be very mild - because the antibodies that fight one herpes simplex virus also help to control the other one.

### What are cold sores like?

- On light-coloured skin, there might be a small red patch.
- A blister or cluster of blisters develops.
- The blister bursts, leaving a raw area.
- The raw area begins to scab and heal.
- Scabs may crack when you move your mouth, and this will delay healing. Try to keep the skin moisturised - see our suggestions below.
- Do not pick at the scab - this will delay healing.
- Wash your hands before and after applying cream.
- The sore will heal by itself without scarring, usually in about 7-10 days.



### Why do cold sores sometimes return?

The virus stays in a nerve junction near the spinal cord and may reappear, from time to time.

### Can my cold sores appear anywhere else?

This is unlikely. If you caught your cold sore on your lips, it might recur elsewhere on your face, but it cannot reappear elsewhere on your body. You make antibodies in response to the virus, and they prevent you from spreading it to another area. They also make it unlikely that you will catch it again.

## Will I know if it is about to come back?

You may feel an itch, tingle or shooting pain first. Repeat cold sores are usually much milder than the first ones.

## What causes a recurrence?

Triggers vary from person to person: try to work out what causes your outbreaks to see if you can prevent them. Common triggers are illness, stress, tiredness, being run down, having a period, too much alcohol, or ultra-violet light from the sun or sunbeds.

## Our suggestions for preventing cold sores

A healthy lifestyle can help to keep your immune system in good shape and make cold sores less likely. Avoid any triggers you have identified. And:

- Get enough sleep.
- Improve your diet.
- Sunlight or sun-beds may trigger cold sores: use a good quality sun block, especially on the lips.

## Can I take anything to stop getting frequent cold sores?

Antiviral tablets may be prescribed for cold sores. If you are getting an unacceptable number of outbreaks, talk to your doctor. Antiviral tablets are a more effective way of treating and preventing cold sores than antiviral creams.

## What treatments can I buy from chemists' shops?

There are different types:

(1) Some creams contain anaesthetics (e.g. lidocaine 5%), benzocaine, prilocaine or tetracaine) which will help stop any soreness if a cold sore breaks through. We can send you a list of these - phone or email [info@herpes.org.uk](mailto:info@herpes.org.uk)

A small trial has shown that a lidocaine 5% ointment prevented outbreaks in one in three of the people testing it and shortened the outbreaks that did appear from 5 days to 2 days. No prescription is needed for lidocaine; ask the pharmacist to check if

he/she says otherwise. Contact us - see details at the end of the leaflet - if you need help getting this.

(2) Antiviral creams containing aciclovir are widely available. If you start using them at the 'tingle' stage, they can shorten outbreaks by 12 percent (from an average of 7 days down to 6¼ days).

A newer antiviral cream, Fenestil, contains penciclovir 1%, and has a similar benefit.

## What self-help suggestions may prevent a cold sore?

A cream containing lemon balm mint (*melissa officinalis*) has been shown to prevent outbreaks if used at the tingle stage. This plant contains molecules which prevent the virus getting into the skin cells. Lomaherpan is a herbal cream made with an extract of lemon balm. Contact us if you are interested in trying this

Some people with cold sores have said that applying a wrapped ice pack to the area for 90 minutes prevents the outbreak; but be careful not to cause frostbite. (This idea has not been medically tested)

## What useful tips may speed up the healing process?

Some people with cold sores have told us that these ideas helped them - they are not medically tested.

- Cold damp tea-bags applied hourly can help.
- Lomaherpan cream - see above.
- Geranium oil, tea tree oil - diluted, and lavender oil - will soothe.
- Keep the skin soft and moist with an unscented product such as Vaseline (petroleum jelly) to prevent scabs from cracking and coming off.

## Are cold sores ever serious?

Medical attention is rarely needed for cold sores.

In rare cases, a cold sore may recur in one eye (not both). This will be a recurrence after a previous facial cold sore infection. If one eye is tingling and sore or red, a GP or an optician can

check if the cause is herpes simplex virus. If it is, you may be referred to a specialist eye hospital.

People with areas of broken skin (like eczema), should be careful during their first infection as sores may spread over the area of broken skin.

People with weakened immune systems (e.g. on cancer drugs, or following an organ transplant) may need medication to prevent cold sores.

Newborn babies should not be exposed to cold sore virus - if you get cold sores, don't kiss babies!

## Don't be self-conscious...

Your cold sores will seem bigger to you than they appear to anyone else!

Ignore advertising campaigns which try to make people with cold sores feel ashamed, embarrassed or worried. Advertising which makes people feel bad about themselves are designed to sell more treatment.

Cold sores are common and most people are not bothered about them.

## The Herpes Viruses Association

We have advice and information leaflets on all herpes viruses. These include more suggestions to stop cold sores returning and lots of help in dealing with genital herpes (cold sores on the genitals). For details of our subscription services and a list of leaflets, check:

<https://herpes.org.uk>



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Full list of references available on request  
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