

Cold Sores (Fever Blisters)

What are cold sores?

Cold sores are annoying, small, painful blisters on the lips and nearby skin, including in the nose and mouth. They usually appear when you are sick or stressed. They are also called fever blisters.

How do they occur?

Cold sores are caused by a virus called herpes simplex virus. The fluid in the blisters contains live virus. The virus in this fluid can easily be spread from one person to another. The infection can be spread, for example, by kissing, by sharing food or drink, or by not washing your hands after touching the sores.

Once you are infected, the virus continues to live in the nerve cells of the skin, even after the sores are gone. Injury, such as a scrape or too much exposure to the sun, and physical illness, such as a cold, seem to cause the virus to become active again. When it is active, the virus causes more cold sores. The sores also may appear during emotional stress.

It is not possible to predict how often you will have cold sores. Some people never have them again, but others have them regularly.

What are the symptoms?

About 24 hours before you can see blisters, you may have a sense of numbness, tingling, itching, or burning. Then a small cluster of tiny blisters appears on your lip or the skin around your lips. The blisters may be somewhat painful. Over the next few days a yellow crust forms on the tops of the blisters and they become less painful.

How are they diagnosed?

Your health care provider can determine from your history and a physical exam whether the blisters are fever blisters. Fluid from the blisters may be tested in the lab (viral cultures).

How are they treated?

There are many nonprescription medications that can be used to treat the symptoms of cold sores. However, they may not work as well as you would like.

Your health care provider may prescribe antiviral medication. This medication can decrease the number of days you have symptoms and speed the drying up of the blisters.

How long will the symptoms last?

The blisters usually last 7 to 10 days. They should be considered contagious as long as you have any moist secretions from the blisters.

How can I take care of myself?

- Taking a nonprescription painkiller such as aspirin, acetaminophen, or ibuprofen may help cold sores feel less painful.
- Putting ice on the blisters may also help lessen the pain.

What can I do to help prevent fever blisters?

- Avoid direct contact with the blisters and with items that touch the sores, such as eating utensils and facial tissues.
- You and others around you should practice good hand washing.
- Take care to avoid spreading the virus to other susceptible areas of your body, such as the eyes and the genitals.
- Just as genital herpes can be spread to the mouth by oral-genital sex, cold sores can be spread to the genitals by oral-genital sex. Be careful not to pass the oral cold sores to your sexual partners.
- Use a lip balm containing sunscreen whenever your lips are exposed to the sun.

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