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## Cold Sores—What You Need To Know

### What are cold sores?

Cold sores are small blisters that usually appear on the outer edge of the lip or near the nostrils. They are also known as fever blisters. Cold sores may appear one at a time or in little groups. They often become little fluid-filled blisters that break open and release a clear, sticky fluid, then crust over and form a scab. They may be painful or itchy. Cold sores usually heal in 1-2 weeks without treatment; treating them may shorten the healing time.

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## Cold Sores

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

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#### What causes cold sores?

Cold sores are caused by a virus called herpes simplex. They are spread by contact with a person who has the virus. Cold sores are most contagious from the time they first appear until they become dry and crusty.

Once the herpes virus is in your body, you may get cold sores occasionally for the rest of your life. You may feel tingling, itching or burning in the area the day before a cold sore appears. Some people find that fatigue, stress, bright sunlight, fever or hormone changes can trigger their cold sores.

### HOW TO TAKE CARE OF COLD SORES:

- Avoid touching the cold sore with your fingers.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water to avoid getting an infection in the cold sore. Washing your hands also helps stop the spread of the virus to other parts of your body or to other people.
- Wash the cold sore gently with mild soap and water to keep it clean.
- Always use your own towel. Do not let other people use your towel.
- Use an ointment (such as Vaseline) on the cold sore to keep it from cracking and drying. This helps prevent getting an infection in the cold sore.

- The best way to apply an ointment is with a clean, cotton-tipped swab (Q-Tip). If you use your finger, be sure to wash your hands with soap and water before and after.
- Ask your health-care provider about pain medicine such as acetaminophen, ibuprofen or naproxen that may help if the cold sore is very painful.
- Ask your health-care provider about ointments that may help stop the pain and itching for a short time.
- Ask your health-care provider about antiviral creams or pills that may make the cold sore heal faster. The sooner you start these medications, the better they will work.

#### How to prevent cold sores from spreading to others:

- Do not share forks, spoons, drinking containers, razors or towels while you have a cold sore.
- Do not kiss others or have oral sex while you have a cold sore.
- Do not have any skin-to-skin contact with young children, people with eczema, people with cancer or HIV, people using biologic medications, or anyone who has had an organ transplant while you have a cold sore because they could catch the virus more easily.

#### How to prevent cold sores:

- Take good care of yourself—some people find that they get cold sores when they are tired and stressed. If this happens to you, try to reduce the stress in your life or learn how to manage it. Regular exercise, getting enough sleep and eating well can help.
- Protect yourself from bright sunlight—some people get cold sores after spending time in the sun, for example, being at the beach or skiing. Apply sunscreen (minimum SPF 30) on lips and face 30 minutes before going out into the sun. Wearing a hat with a wide brim can also help.

#### You should see a health-care provider if:

- The cold sore gets worse or the skin around it looks red or contains pus; you may have an infection.
- The skin around the cold sore becomes red and swollen after using a numbing ointment (stop using the ointment).
- The cold sore does not go away after 14 days of care.
- The cold sore spreads or you feel sick with a fever or swollen glands.
- You have a health condition or take a medication that affects your immune system.
- You get cold sores often (6 or more in a year); your health-care provider may prescribe medicine to help decrease the number.
- You want to discuss medications to help treat your cold sore so it is less painful or heals faster.