

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

Oral Herpes (Cold Sores)**WHAT ARE COLD SORES?**

Cold sores are painful blisters of the mouth and lips caused by the Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV). There are two HSV types:

- ❖ **HSV-1** is the most common cause of cold sores because it prefers to infect the mouth and lips. However, HSV-1 can also infect other skin and mucous membrane surfaces, and, less commonly, different organs of the body.
 - It is estimated that 50-80% of adults in the US have oral herpes. An HSV-1 infection of the mouth (oral HSV-1) is not considered to be a sexually transmitted infection. Most people have their first episode of oral HSV-1 during childhood.
 - HSV-1 is becoming an increasingly common cause of genital herpes because it can be transmitted to the penis or vagina during oral sex.
 - HSV-1 can also infect other skin surfaces (like the face, neck, and fingers), the eyes, and rarely, the brain. Infections of the eye and brain require immediate medical evaluation to prevent complications.
- ❖ **HSV-2** prefers to infect the genital area and is the most common cause of genital herpes. Occasionally HSV-2 can result in cold sores in the mouth if oral sex is performed on someone who has genital herpes.

HOW DOES HSV-1 SPREAD?

HSV-1 is easily spread from person to person via direct contact with infected oral secretions or infected skin. Transmission is possible even if no symptoms are present.

- Cold sores are commonly spread through intimate contact with oral secretions, such as kissing. Transmission can also occur by sharing eating utensils, drinking glasses, lip balm, etc.
- HSV-1 infections of the skin are often spread by close skin-to-skin contact (such as in contact sports, like wrestling). HSV-1 can also be spread by sharing personal care items, like razors and towels.
- An infected person can also transmit the virus from one site of their body to another. This is called auto-transmission.

WHAT ARE TYPICAL SYMPTOMS OF COLD SORES?

Symptoms vary depending on whether it is the first time a person is getting cold sores. The first episode usually occurs during childhood. However, many people do not know that they are infected because they never develop symptoms.

- ❖ **The first episode (or primary infection)** tends to be more severe and can include:
 - The sudden onset of painful blisters on the mouth, lips, tongue, nose, or throat. The blisters will eventually break and form scabs.
 - Blisters may also be accompanied by fever, headache, muscle aches, and/or swollen lymph nodes. Adults may experience severe sore throat.
 - Symptoms during the first episode can last 10-14 days.
- ❖ **Recurrent infections** are common. They tend to be milder and shorter than the initial outbreak, lasting 8 days or less.
 - Blisters usually occur at or near the site of the primary infection.
 - Many patients can tell when their cold sores are coming back. They often experience a prodrome, which can consist of pain, burning, tingling, or itching at the site of infection 1-2 days before blisters appear.
 - Some patients have no symptoms or only develop prodromal symptoms (without blisters).
 - Cold sores can be triggered by physical and emotional stress. Examples include exposure to sunlight, sudden changes in temperature or weather, skin irritation (from skin products, food, braces, lip biting, sunburn, etc), and menstruation.

Cold sores can sometimes be confused with canker sores, which are painful shallow ulcers that do not blister or scab over. The cause of canker sores is unknown.

WHEN SHOULD I SEEK MEDICAL CARE?

See your medical provider if your symptoms are severe or if you are having trouble eating and/or drinking.

Seek medical attention IMMEDIATELY if you have any of the following:

- Diffuse spreading of the blisters or pustules, especially to the face or mouth.
- Eye symptoms, including blisters on or near the eye, eye redness, eye pain, sensitivity to light, changes in vision, and persistent tearing.
- Severe headache, fever, seizures, impaired consciousness/cognition, changes in balance.

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?

Most of the time, cold sores can be diagnosed by their appearance alone. Labs are available to confirm the diagnosis if needed.

- Swabbing an open blister for culture within 24-48 hours of symptom onset allows for identification of the virus and its type (1 or 2).
- Blood tests for antibodies to HSV may also be considered. However, it takes at least 2 weeks after exposure for this test to be accurate.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT?

Treatments are available to decrease symptoms, but there is no cure for cold sores. Once you have the virus, you are infected for life. However, recurrences usually get milder with time or may be completely asymptomatic.

❖ Most people who have mild symptoms do not need specific treatment.

- Over-the-counter pain medications or oral gels can be used to control pain.
- Sucking on ice or popsicles may also decrease pain.

❖ Antiviral medications may be considered for more severe infections. These medicines cannot cure HSV, but they can decrease the severity and duration of symptoms, as well as reduce transmission to others.

- Acyclovir and Valacyclovir are the most commonly used oral antiviral medications. They should be started as soon as symptoms develop.
- Antiviral creams, like Abreva and Zovirax, have NOT been shown to be effective against HSV.
- Less commonly, patients with frequent outbreaks may be given suppressive therapy with a daily antiviral medication to reduce both recurrence and transmission risks.

HOW DO I PREVENT THE SPREAD OF INFECTION?

Though you are more likely to spread herpes to others if you have symptoms, transmission is possible even if there are no symptoms. Use excellent personal hygiene at all times. Also avoid picking at any skin lesions, such as acne or eczema.

❖ If blisters or other symptoms are present,

- Avoid touching the skin in question.
- Wash and dry your hands thoroughly if you touch any blisters.
- Avoid close skin-to-skin contact with others, including kissing and giving oral sex.
- Do not share utensils, cups, lip balm, towels, etc.
- Do not shave until symptoms resolve. Use a new your razor, and do not share razors.
- Notify your healthcare provider if you are pregnant.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES: www.mayoclinic.org, familydoctor.org/cold-sore-treatment/