

## DESCRIPTION

A common viral infection that affects the skin. In most cases, people become infected with the virus in childhood. The first time a person (usually a child) is infected, symptoms may include mouth sores, sore throat, fever, aching, tiredness, problems with eating, and swollen glands. The virus then stays inactive in the body (sometimes for months or years), until an active infection occurs and cold sores result.

## FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Cold sores usually involve the lips. In some cases, they occur on nostrils, cheeks, or fingers. Prior to a cold sore, the skin area may feel itchy, tingly, or sensitive.
- A cluster of small, painful, fluid-filled blisters appear in the affected area. The blisters break and ooze. A yellow crust forms and sloughs off, leaving pink skin and no scarring.

## CAUSES

- Herpes simplex virus type 1, or, less often, herpes simplex type 2 (the cause of genital herpes). The virus is spread from person to person by contact with fluid from a cold sore, saliva, contact with an item that has the germs on it, or sharing food or drinks with an infected person. The blisters and open sores can spread the virus until they heal.
- Risk factors (listed below) may trigger an outbreak of cold sores, but they can recur for unknown reasons.

## RISK INCREASES WITH

- Physical or emotional stress.
- Illness, including a cold, flu, or fever from any cause.
- Menstrual periods.
- Dental treatment that stretches the mouth.
- Weak immune system due to illness or drugs.
- Exposure to the sun.
- Certain foods or drugs.
- Eczema (a skin infection).
- In daycare settings, sharing toys that children put in their mouths.

## EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Recovery takes a few days to a week. Recurrence will vary for different people. Cold sores may recur often or rarely. Complications are unlikely.

## GENERAL MEASURES

- Apply ice to the affected area, or use nonprescription products for cold sores, to ease discomfort.
- Don't squeeze or pick at the blisters. Avoid touching them except to apply cream or ointment. Then wash hands carefully. Be careful about touching other places in the body, especially the eyes and genital area, where the infection could spread.
- Don't share lip products, or cups and other utensils.
- Avoid close contact with others, especially newborns and those with weakened immune systems.
- Cold sores can be spread to others by sexual contact.

## MEDICATIONS

- Use aspirin, acetaminophen, or ibuprofen to relieve minor pain. Don't give aspirin to children under 18.
- Nonprescription creams or ointments for cold sores may be used.
- Antiviral drugs will usually be prescribed. They can be taken by mouth or applied to the skin.

## SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION IF

- The cold sore does not heal within a week.
- Signs of infection, such as fever or pus, instead of clear fluid in the blister.
- Sores develop on the genitals, or the eyes become infected.
- You have a weak immune system due to illness or drugs.