



Cold Sores

Dr P A Atkin BDS MSc MBBS MFDS RCPS (Glasg)

The cold sore virus is very common and is carried by up to 80% of the population. It is caused by a virus called 'herpes simplex' (HSV). Cold sores are highly infectious and capable of spreading to other parts of the body. Once you have been infected, the virus lies dormant in the nerves supplying feeling to the face and mouth. The virus can subsequently be reactivated, and it is the reactivation that presents as cold sores on the lips.

Triggers

It is important in managing this condition that you identify what triggers your outbreak of cold sores.

Most cold sore sufferers can identify everyday events that trigger the reactivation of the virus and lead to the development of a cold sore. These triggers can vary between individuals, for example, where one person is more affected by the cold, another sufferer may be more susceptible to sunlight. Identifying your trigger is the first step you can take towards managing your cold sores.

Common trigger factors include:-

- Ultraviolet (UV) light from sunshine or sunbed exposure.
- Emotional stress or exhaustion.
- Common cold, flu or feverish illness.
- Feeling physically low or fatigued leading to a weakened immune system.
- Menstruation.
- Exposure to extreme temperatures or weather conditions.
- Pregnancy.
- An injury to the mouth, surgical operation or dental treatment.
- A knock on the lips or face.

What happens when I have a cold sore? – The cold sore cycle

There are five different stages a sufferer may go through:-

- **Tingle:** This stage normally lasts between a few hours and a day. The cold sore is 'invisible' at this stage but you may feel a tingling or burning sensation. If an antiviral cream (aciclovir) is applied at this stage you may prevent the visible signs of the cold sore from appearing. Aciclovir attacks the virus and stops it from multiplying.
- **Blister:** This stage is characterised by a small group of painful, fluid-filled blisters. These are normally seen on the second day of the cold sore cycle. Here again, treatment with an antiviral cream (such as Zovirax, which contains aciclovir) will reduce the life of the cold sore.
- **Ulcer:** Once the small blisters have burst, a weeping ulcer is seen that may last for several days. This stage is also very painful. The clear liquid that is released from the ulcer contains a high number of viral particles and as such is highly contagious.
- **Scab:** After about 4 days a thin scab will form, acting as a protective covering for the new skin that is forming beneath. The skin around the scab may dry and crack and even bleed. Moisturising the area will help to reduce this. The scab may also be itchy, but is not contagious at this stage.
- **Healing:** After 9–12 days the cold sore will have healed. A slightly red/pink area of skin will remain but will quickly fade.

Most people who get cold sores will usually experience around 2–3 attacks per year although some people may get as many as twelve.

How can I reduce the risk of spreading the virus?

- Try not to break the blisters or pick the scabs.
- Always wash your hands after touching the cold sore or applying medication.
- Avoid kissing when you have a cold sore.
- Do not touch the eyes and take extra care when applying or removing make-up.
- Do not wet contact lenses with saliva while you have a cold sore and always wash your hands before touching your lenses.
- Sharing eating or drinking utensils, such as cutlery and cups, should be avoided, especially with children.
- Avoid oral sex if a cold sore is present since this may lead to genital herpes.
- Do not share personal hygiene items such as toothbrushes, face cloths or towels.
- Make sure your cold sore is healed before visiting your dentist. Telephone your dentist if you are concerned about this as it might affect your appointment.

NB. Consult your doctor if a cold sore becomes severe or extensive.

What treatment is available?

Once you have been infected, the virus cannot be removed. There are medicines available to treat the first episode of infection and to treat recurring cold sores.

These are a few key points to remember when treating your cold sore:-

- Try to treat your cold sore as soon as you start to feel one developing (the tingle stage) as this

can reduce the duration of the cold sore by up to 50%.

- It's never too late to start treating your cold sore as even during the blister stage, antiviral creams (such as Zovirax) are effective.
- An untreated cold sore will usually last between nine and eleven days.
- Treatment with an antiviral cream (such as Zovirax) will also help prevent the spread of the virus.

Treating the first infection

For an adult or child over two years old with a first infection, tablets from your dentist or doctor can be taken five times a day for five days.

Treating recurring cold sores

To treat recurring cold sores, Zovirax Cold Sore Cream can be applied five times a day for five days beginning as soon as the tingling sensation of a cold sore begins, or as soon as the cold sore appears on the lip. The cream can be bought from a pharmacy, but the tablets must be prescribed by your dentist or doctor.

For further help and advice regarding cold sores, please telephone the Cold Sore Information Bureau (CSIB) 0845 603 0052 or visit their website www.csib.co.uk.

For further dental information go to www.dental365.com

Notes:

Web address:.....

This information is of a general nature only, if you have any questions, please ask your dentist.

Visit www.dental365.com for ideas and information to keep your teeth healthy and looking good

www.dental365.com

Search the A-Z of over 300 dental conditions and treatments!

