

Cold Sores

The Cause of Cold Sores

Cold sores are lesions caused by the herpes simplex virus 1 (HSV-1). They may also appear on the face, chin, and nose. They are also referred to as *herpes simplex labialis* because they usually appear on the lips and bordering areas. Cold sores, which are caused by a virus, are often confused with canker sores, which are not caused by a virus; in fact canker sores have no known cause. It is estimated that approximately 80-90% of the population are affected the herpes simplex virus, although it is possible to have the virus and never get a cold sore. For about 20-40%, repeated outbreaks are common. The virus usually appears for the first time in early childhood and remains in the body after the initial episode. After the primary infection, the virus remains dormant until it reactivates and infects skin cells.



Signs and Symptoms

Symptoms may not appear for several weeks after the first exposure to the virus, which usually occurs before age 12. Adults generally develop symptoms when the virus is triggered. Some people may experience a "prodrome" episode, which consists of pain, burning, tingling, or itching, before the first blisters appear. About 25-30% of patients do not experience prodrome symptoms, and the first sign is the appearance of a cold sore.

Within the next 24 hours, fluid-filled blisters appear, eventually leaking fluid, cracking, and forming a yellow crust, accompanied by itching or burning. The scab may crack and bleed, finally falling off and leaving behind some redness and swelling. The healing process takes approximately 8 to 10 days.

Over-the-Counter Treatments

Many products available over the counter are safe and effective in relieving cold sore symptoms.

Skin protectants

Petroleum jelly or petrolatum, allantoin, glycerin, and cocoa butter-help soften the skin. This effect helps keep the lesions moist and reduces the chance of dryness.

External analgesics and anesthetics

Benzocaine, lidocaine, dibucaine, camphor, menthol, and benzyl alcohol are considered safe and effective in temporarily relieving pain and itching caused by the lesions. (Products with a high content of menthol and camphor may produce irritation.) Oral analgesics such as acetaminophen, aspirin, and ibuprofen can also be used to relieve pain.

Cell entry blockers

Abreva (docosanol) is the only nonprescription medication that shortens the healing time and duration of symptoms. Abreva helps protect against the herpes simplex virus by modifying the cell membrane and preventing the ability of the virus to combine with the cell. It is important to use Abreva as soon as the first symptoms (redness, itching, tingling) appear; the sooner treatment is started, the fewer infected cells there are likely to be. Abreva can be used by those 12 years of age and over and should be applied five times a day until the lesions heal. If the lesions are still present after 10 days, consult a physician.

Key Points to Remember

- ✓ Use a lip moisturizer to prevent chapping
- ✓ Apply sunblock containing SPF to the lips and face before exposure to sun
- ✓ Avoid sharing items that can spread the virus and wash hands frequently
- ✓ Contact your physician if the cold sore lasts more than 10 days