

# COLD SORES (FEVER BLISTERS; HERPES SIMPLEX)

## TO YOUR HEALTH - PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUT

### DESCRIPTION

A common, contagious virus (herpes simplex or HSV-1) infection. Cold sores are sometimes confused with impetigo. They usually involve the lips; gums and mouth area; cornea (rare); genitals (occasionally).

### FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Eruptions of very small, painful blisters usually around the mouth, but sometimes on the genitals. The blisters are grouped together on a red base. The blisters crust over, dry up, and disappear. If the eye is infected, eye pain and redness; feeling that something is in the eye; sensitivity to light; and tearing.

### CAUSES

Infection with a herpes virus that invades the skin, may remain inactive for months or years before causing active inflammation. Most persons develop antibodies that control the virus unless risk factors (below) develop. The virus is transmitted by person-to-person contact or by contact with discharge from an infected eye, saliva, stools, or urine. The blisters and ulcers of herpes simplex are contagious until they heal.

### RISK INCREASES WITH

- Newborns
- Eczema or other skin conditions
- Physical or emotional stress
- Illness that has lowered resistance, including a cold, minor gastrointestinal upset or fever from any cause
- Excessive sun exposure
- Menstrual periods
- Dental treatment that stretches the mouth
- Use of immunosuppressive drugs
- UV exposure

### PREVENTIVE MEASURES

Avoid physical contact with others who have active lesions. Wash your hands often during a flare-up to avoid spreading the virus to other parts of your body and other individuals.

### EXPECTED OUTCOME

Spontaneous recovery in a few days to a week, occasionally longer. Recurrence is common. The virus remains in the body for life, but is usually dormant.

### POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

Permanent vision impairment, if herpes eye infections are untreated. Severe, widespread infection in patients with eczema. Meningitis or encephalitis (rare).

### GENERAL MEASURES

The appearance of the typical lesion is usually diagnostic, however, a laboratory study may be done of fluid from the sore for confirmation. Drink cool liquids or suck frozen juice bars to reduce discomfort. Apply a cold compress during the first 24 hours after a lesion appears. This may make it heal more quickly. Don't rub or scratch an infected eye. Don't manipulate lesions. To prevent flare-ups, use zinc oxide or sun-screen preparations on your lips when you spend time outdoors.

### MEDICATION

Use acetaminophen to relieve minor pain. Don't use aspirin, especially for children and adolescents. The use of aspirin during some viral illnesses may lead to Reye's syndrome, a form of encephalitis. Don't try to treat an infected eye especially with cortisone ointments or drops. Cortisone preparations promote growth of the herpes virus in the cornea. Antiviral topical or oral medication, antibiotic ointment, if lesions become infected with bacteria, may be prescribed. Oral medication may occasionally be recommended continuously to prevent frequent episodes.

### ACTIVITY & DIET

No restrictions, except to avoid close contact especially kissing or oral sex until lesions heal. Avoid contact with newborns or patients who are taking immunosuppressant drugs (they are more susceptible to infection). No special diet.

### NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF..

- Signs of secondary bacterial infection, such as a fever, pus instead of clear fluid in the lesions, headache and muscle aches.
- Eruption of lesions on the genitals similar to those around the mouth.
- New, unexplained symptoms.
- Drugs used in treatment may produce side effects.
- If lesions persist longer than 2 weeks.

Student Health Center



[WWW.SIU.EDU/~SHC](http://WWW.SIU.EDU/~SHC)

This information is for educational purposes only. Consult your doctor for specific medical advice, diagnosis and treatment.

618-453-3311

Dial-A-Nurse is available after-hours until 10:30 p.m. during fall and spring semesters. In case of emergency dial 911.