

Cold Sores (Herpes Simplex)

Cold sores are a common and painful problem for children just as for adults. They are caused by a virus called herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1). Although this virus can cause the sexually transmitted disease genital herpes, the two diseases are not the same.

What are cold sores?

Cold sores are common and painful sores occurring in or around your child's mouth. The virus that causes them, herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1), is very common and spreads very easily. Although the virus is commonly spread by kissing, it may also spread by more casual contact.

Cold sores usually go away on their own within a week or so, but they may come back repeatedly. Treatment with a drug called acyclovir may offer some help for more severe cases.

What do they look like?

Two kinds of herpes simplex outbreaks may occur: primary and recurrent.

- *Primary.* When your child is first infected with HSV-1, it causes a more severe outbreak. In addition to cold sores, there may be other symptoms such as fever, swollen gums, enlarged lymph nodes, and sore throat.
- *Recurrent.* Cold sores may come back once in a while. Recurrent outbreaks are much less severe than the primary outbreak. Your child will probably have no fever or other symptoms. However, HSV-1 can cause sores elsewhere on the body.

Cold sore symptoms.

- Your child may notice tingling, mild pain, or itching in or around the mouth for a few days before a cold sore appears.
- The sore initially looks like a small blister, which eventually crusts over and breaks open. The blister may be quite painful and may make it difficult to eat. The sores can also be embarrassing for your child as they are unsightly looking.
- More than one blister may occur at a time. The corners of the mouth are the most common location, but sores may also occur on the lips or inside the mouth.
- Cold sores usually go away in a week or so. They may come back frequently, only once in a while, or never.

What causes cold sores?

Cold sores are caused by infection with a very common virus called herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1).

- HSV-1 is *not* the same as the HSV-2 virus that usually causes the sexually transmitted disease genital herpes, although HSV-1 can also cause genital herpes. Having cold sores does *not* mean your child has caught the virus by having sex or being sexually abused.
- Although many people have HSV-1, it does not always cause symptoms.
- Once your child is infected with HSV-1, he or she will probably carry the virus for life. The virus may become "reactivated" from time to time, causing repeated cold sores. Although HSV-1 can cause more serious disease, this is relatively uncommon.

What are some complications of cold sores?

- The herpes simplex viruses are widespread viruses that can cause a number of diseases. Many of us are infected with HSV-1. Fortunately, however, unless we have some type of disease that interferes with our immune system's ability to fight off germs, the HSV-1 causes only minor problems, such as cold sores. Rarely it may cause infection of the brain (encephalitis meningitis).
- *Bacterial infections.* Cold sores may become infected with bacteria or may lead to ulcers that take a long time to heal. Sores may become more crusted (yellow or oozing pus).
- The rate of recurrent cold sores is highly individual. As your child gets older, recurrences are likely to be less frequent.

What puts your child at risk of cold sores?

- If your child has had cold sores previously, damage to the lips from sunburn or dryness can increase the risk of a new outbreak.
- Cold sores and other diseases caused by HSV-1 may be more frequent or severe if your child has any condition that interferes with normal immune function.

Can cold sores be prevented?

- Many people have the HSV-1 virus. Having your child avoid contact with people who have cold sores may be helpful but is not always very practical.

- When your child is in contact with people who have cold sores, encourage him or her to wash hands frequently and avoid sharing things like glasses or towels. The virus can still be passed on for a while after cold sores have disappeared.

How are cold sores treated?

Most of the time, the doctor will recognize cold sores caused by HSV-1 without the need for any special tests. In some situations, your doctor may recommend testing for HSV-1.

For primary herpes simplex outbreaks, the doctor will probably recommend an antiviral medication. These medications are helpful only if the infection is caught early.

For recurrent outbreaks of cold sores:

- Remind your child not to pick at the sores. Keep the area clean and dry. Your doctor may recommend an antiseptic mouthwash.
- Topical antiviral creams may help cold sores clear up more quickly. Your doctor may recommend oral medications if more severe or extensive HSV-1 is present. However, these medications are usually not used for simple cold sores.
- Cold sores usually clear up on their own within 7 to 10 days, with or without treatment.

- If sores are very painful, pain relievers such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen may help.
- Ice-cold drinks or popsicles may make the mouth feel better, especially if the sores make it very painful for your child to eat or drink. Make sure infants, in particular, are getting enough fluids to avoid dehydration.
- Anesthetic sprays or lozenges may help to reduce pain temporarily.

When should I call your office?

Call our office if:

- Your child has a cold sore accompanied by a high fever or other symptoms that might mean primary herpes simplex infection.
- Your child's cold sores haven't cleared up within 7 to 10 days.
- Your child has any signs of an infected cold sore (redness, pus).
- Your child has signs of possible dehydration (not drinking enough fluids: decreased urine, decreased tears, dryness inside the mouth).