

COLD SORES – WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Cold sores are a very frequent occurrence. They are caused by the herpes simplex virus Type I (HSV-1). They frequently start in childhood and are typically passed from person to person such as a relative kissing a child. They can also be spread by kids sharing toys in their mouth. Later on, it can be acquired by kissing or other forms of contact. It is one of the most frequent viruses and many doctors feel it has evolved with us. Studies have shown the majority of Americans are positive for antibodies to the HSV-1 virus by age 30. Most people who actually are infected never show symptoms of the virus but nevertheless have it. Symptoms of the cold sores include lesions or blisters on the tongue, mouth, lips or the skin around the mouth. However, they occasionally can occur around the nose, cheek or eyelid. Sometimes the first infection, also known as primary infection, can be both sides of the face and cause pain, sore throat and difficulty swallowing along with swollen glands. Recurrences, which are far more common, usually occur on one side of the body, typically in the same place every time. Recurrences are much milder, but still are disconcerting and can be tender.

Most people have some tingling and itching. Often times an abnormal sensation occurs the day before the actual blisters or red spot occurs. Once the blisters occur, they go through different phases where they often turn yellow and crust over and dry up, which can often take a week.

TRIGGERS: Cold sores vary in their frequency. Some people get them almost every month. Other people might get them every few years or never again. Some people report going to a sunny climate such as a trip to the Caribbean, especially in the winter time when your body has not acclimated regardless of your skin color. Skiing, which also exposes the body to ultraviolet radiation, can trigger this. For some people, it may be triggered by menstruation. Many patients complain of stress, fatigue and injury to the affected area such as with dental work being triggers.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT? It is important to make an accurate diagnosis so that you are not taking medicine for a different reason, such as a rash or a bacterial infection on the face. It is also important to know that cold sores can recur, and they must also be differentiated from canker sores, also known as aphthous ulcers. These typically occur on the wet side of the lip or inside the mouth and do not respond to medicine typically given to herpes viruses.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO? One thing not to do is not to pop the cold sore because it spreads the infectious fluid and increases your chance of spreading the virus to other people. It can also prolong the healing and sometimes lead to a bacterial infection. There are over the counter medicines such as Abreva and others at your pharmacy. If you see a dermatologist, they may give you a pill called Valacyclovir which often works very quickly, especially when taken at the first sign such as tingling from the cold sore. There are also some creams with a little bit of cortisone which may help with the itching and burning sensation, and your dermatologist may sometimes give antibiotic cream as well. There is also an Acyclovir cream that can be used in mild cases. These medications are very safe and can be used, so be sure to ask for refills. It is important to note that while cold sores are often thought to be a type of herpes virus infection of

the lips, they can spread to the genitals through performing oral sex. While the majority of cold sores will eventually heal even without treatment, patients with a skin incision called eczema can often have the virus spread over larger parts of their body that are covered with the eczema. If you or your doctor are unsure of the diagnosis, which typically may be made by looking at the patient, the spots can be swabbed and the fluid tested for herpes simplex virus. There is no cure for cold sores, and the virus does stay in your body for life. Most people seem to improve over time in terms of the frequency of their cold sore outbreaks. Antiviral medications can speed up in the healing and decrease the shedding of the virus so we do recommend that you see your dermatologist. It is okay to take pain relievers like Tylenol or Advil or even numbing cream. Please see your doctor right away if you are concerned that it may have spread to your eye, also known as herpes keratitis. Some things you can do at home include cold compresses. Some home remedies people try include Aloe vera gel, lemon balm or witch hazel. While the discomfort sometimes improves, it does not actually get rid of the virus or help to get rid of your cold sore more quickly.

Although there is no guaranteed way to avoid a future outbreak, some things you can do to reduce your chances include reducing stress and getting enough sleep. If you are going to be out in the sun, use a sunscreen with SPF 30, paying particular attention to the lips, as many lip balms will often include a sunscreen with an SPF of at least 30 as well.