

What Are Cold Sores?

Cold sores -- also called fever blisters -- are a painful infection caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV Type 1). They are most likely to appear on the outside of your mouth and lips, your nose, cheeks, or fingers. Blisters form, then break and ooze; a yellow crust develops and eventually sloughs off, revealing new skin underneath. The sores usually last seven to ten days and are contagious until they crust over completely.

Ninety percent of all people get at least one cold sore in their lives. After the first infection, many people develop antibodies and never have another cold sore. About 40% of American adults, however, have repeated cold sores.

The virus may be triggered by certain foods, stress, fever, colds, allergies, sunburn, and menstruation.

What Are the Symptoms?

- Fluid-filled blisters or red, painful sores on or near the mouth, or on fingers.
- Swollen, sensitive gums of a deep red color.
- A fever, flu-like symptoms, and swollen lymph nodes in the neck often accompanying the first attack. Recurrent sores usually don't produce these symptoms.
- Tingling and itching in the area of a previous outbreak -- symptoms of a recurrence.

What Are the Treatments?

You can't cure a cold sore, but you can alleviate the pain it causes by avoiding spicy or acidic foods, applying ice, and using over-the-counter remedies. Look for medicines that contain numbing agents such as phenol and emollients to reduce cracking and soften scabs. Abreva is an over the counter topical remedy used to help speed healing and minimize pain from a cold sore.

How Can I Prevent Them?

- Wash your hands after touching a cold sore.
- Replace your toothbrush.
- Eat foods high in lysine, or take supplements.
- Don't kiss someone who has a cold sore or use the same utensils, towels, or razors.
- Use sunscreen to the face and lips before prolonged exposure to the sun.