

## Cold Sores (or Fever Blisters)

**C**old sores are small red blisters that usually appear in a group on the lip; but they can also appear below the nose, on the cheek, chin, or in the genital area. These blisters can be quite painful and may be accompanied by a low-grade fever. They are often filled with a clear fluid and turn into scabs after a few days. Tingling or numbness may precede or follow the appearance of these sores.

Cold sores are caused by a herpes virus. Herpes is a family of viruses that causes a number of diseases, including chickenpox, shingles, genital herpes, and cold sores. All of these infections are contagious and can be passed on from one person to another when they are in an active state.

After the first infection, these viruses stay in the body in a dormant state, but may become active again later. Cold sores may be actively triggered by colds, fevers, exposure to the sun, hormonal changes, or stress.

The virus that causes cold sores is spread by direct or indirect contact—such as by kissing or sharing eating utensils—with someone who has an active cold sore. Most people are exposed to the virus in childhood, often before the age of five. However, not everyone who is exposed develops the infection.

Cold sores are very common and generally not serious. However, it's important not to touch your eyes after touching the sores, as this can sometimes cause a serious eye infection. It's also important to wash your hands thoroughly anytime you touch an area with cold sores.

To help prevent infection with the herpes virus that causes cold sores, don't kiss anyone who has a cold sore, and avoid direct skin contact with genital herpes sores. Both types of herpes can affect either the mouth or the genitals. Also, if you notice that exposure to the sun triggers cold sores, be sure to apply sunscreen on your lips and wear a hat. Finally, minimizing stress may reduce the frequency of cold sores.

Cold sores usually clear up by themselves in 7 to 10 days and respond well to home treatment. At the first sign of a cold sore (such as a tingling or prickling feeling), apply ice to the area. This may help reduce the severity of the sore. Applying petroleum jelly will help to ease cracking and dryness. To reduce pain, try ibuprofen (such as Advil or Motrin) or acetaminophen (such as Tylenol). Nonprescription ointments (like Blistex or Campho-Phenique) may also help to ease the pain. If your cold sores last longer than two weeks or if they keep coming back, call your medical professional. A medication may be prescribed that can reduce the frequency and severity of the outbreaks. At present, there is not a treatment that gets rid of them forever.

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**For more health information ...**

- Connect to our Web site at *members.kp.org*. The Health encyclopedia has in-depth information on cold sores.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY, call 1-800-777-9059.
- Visit your facility's Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse any brand names; any similar products may be used.

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