

# **Cold Sores**

## **What is a cold sore?**

Cold sores -- small blisters filled with fluid that most often occur around the mouth area -- are referred to as herpes labialis or fever blisters. Herpes labialis is a painful and highly contagious condition that commonly affects the lips, mucous membranes, gums and skin around the mouth, but it can also spread to the fingers or eyes. An individual will break out with small bumps or blisters that eventually turn into scabs and go away. Cold sores are caused by herpes simplex virus type I. Genital herpes is caused by herpes simplex virus type II. An individual will generally break out with a cold sore within one or two weeks of direct contact with the virus. Stress, menstruation, exposure to the sun, an arid climate, trauma to the mouth area and poor diet can cause a cold sore. Some individuals are more susceptible to the virus, and may have repeated breakouts.

## **What are the symptoms?**

Symptoms include tingling, burning, itching, pain and tenderness in the area prior to the eruption of the blisters. An individual about to break out may have a headache, fever or flu-like symptoms.

## **How long do cold sores last?**

Once the blisters develop, they rupture and fluid drains out -- forming a crusty sore. The cold sore -- which lasts seven to 10 days -- eventually goes away without scarring. There is an array of medications on the market designed to help alleviate the pain and promote healing, but most do not shorten the duration of the infection.

## **How do you prevent cold sores?**

During the early stages, the virus is extremely contagious. An individual, however, remains contagious until the sore crusts over. If an individual has a cold sore, do not share utensils or food with this person, and avoid kissing or sexual contact until the cold sore is gone. If you have a cold sore, wash your hands and avoid touching other areas of your body because the virus can spread very easily. For example, if you have a cut on your finger, the infection can be transmitted to that area. If the virus is spread to the eyes, it may cause ocular herpes, which can lead to blindness.

## **How do you treat cold sores?**

There are many different kinds of prescription and over-the-counter medications that include topical ointments, tablets and herbal remedies. Certain medications are prescribed to prevent future breakouts, while others may be used to help speed up the healing process. A healthcare professional can advise you on various treatment options. Ice may help with pain. The area should be kept as clean as possible.

## **When should you contact your physician or dentist?**

If you experience recurring cold sores, contact your physician or dentist who can diagnose the problem and recommend the best course of treatment.