

Cold Sores are pretty common and lots of people get them. So what causes them and what can you do?

Cold sores, sometimes called fever blisters, are groups of small blisters on the lip and around the mouth. The skin around the blisters is often red, swollen, and painful.

Q: What Causes Cold Sores?

A: Cold sores are caused by a virus known as the herpes simplex virus (HSV). There are two types of HSV, type I and type II. Cold sores are usually caused by type I. Herpes simplex is caused by a contagious oral virus. The virus is spread from person to person by kissing, other close contact with sores - or even from contact with apparently normal skin that is shedding the virus. Infected saliva is also a means of spreading the virus. The most contagious period occurs when there are active blister-like sores. Once the blisters have dried and crusted over (within a few days) the risk of contagion is significantly lessened.

Q: How long do cold sores last?

A: The lesions usually last for 7 to 10 days, then begin to resolve. The virus may become latent, residing in the nerve cells, with recurrence at or near the original site. Recurring lesions are usually milder, and may be triggered by sun exposure, fever, stress, or other unknown causes.

Q: What are the Symptoms?

A: Warning symptoms of itching, burning, increased sensitivity, or tingling sensations may occur about two days before lesions appear. Other symptoms include:

- Skin lesions or rash around the lips, mouth, and gums
- Small blisters filled with clear yellowish fluid
- Blisters on a raised, red, painful skin area
- Blisters that form, break, and ooze
- Yellow crusts that slough to reveal pink, healing skin
- Several smaller blisters that merge to form a larger blister
- Mild fever, sore throat, and other flu-like symptoms

Q: I get cold sores from time to time. How do I know when I need treatment??

A: You should seek professional treatment the following cases:

- Your symptoms persist for more than 1 or 2 weeks.
- Your symptoms seem severe.
- You have an immunosuppressive disorder and develop herpes symptoms.

Q: What can I do to treat cold sores at home?

A: Most cold sores will heal on their own, but you can help to manage your symptoms at home by:

- Placing a cool, wet towel on the sores 3 times a day for 20 minutes each time to help reduce redness and swelling.
- Taking ibuprofen (such as Advil or Motrin) or acetaminophen (such as Tylenol) to reduce pain. Do not give aspirin to anyone younger than 20 because of its link to Reye syndrome.
- Using a mouth rinse that has baking soda can help to soothe a sore mouth.
- Avoiding foods that contain acid (such as citrus fruits and tomatoes).

- Using nonprescription ointments that can relieve pain or help heal the cold sore. Some products, can speed the healing of cold sores or prevent them if applied early enough, while other products can numb sore areas in the mouth or on the lips

If you are experiencing a cold sore that requires treatment call Dermatology Associates of the Lowcountry (843) 689-5259 on Hilton Head or 843-705-0840 in Bluffton / Okatie and schedule a consult appointment.