

Cold Sores

FACTSHEET

Cold Sores/Fever Blister/Herpes Simplex Virus I

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What is a cold sore?

A cold sore or fever blister is caused by a virus called Herpes simplex. This is an infection of the skin that usually returns again and again. This is because when the virus is cleared from the body by the immune system it hides in the nerve endings and is never completely removed from the body.

Who gets cold sores?

People of all ages get cold sores. These infections are very common. Many people are infected and don't even know it.

What are the symptoms of cold sores?

A cold sore may start out as a group of small red bumps that blister. Sometimes there is itching and burning before the red bumps occur. The blisters begin to dry up after a few days and form a yellow crust. The crust then falls off and the redness goes away. Cold sores occur most frequently around the mouth and lips but can also infect the gums and throat. Facial scars rarely form from cold sores.

How are cold sores spread?

Cold sores are spread from one person to another by contact with the lesion (blister) or saliva of an infected person. Hands need to be washed frequently to minimize spread of the virus.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms can appear from two to twelve days after infection.

Is a person with cold sores contagious?

Yes, a person with cold sores is contagious.

How are cold sores treated?

Treatment of cold sores is usually not necessary. There are several over the counter products that can be used to help relieve the pain associated with a cold sore. The cold sore area needs to be kept clean.

Should a person with cold sores be excluded from work or school?

It is usually not necessary to exclude a person with cold sores from work or school. However, in a child-care setting, exclude a child with open blisters or mouth sores if the child is a biter, drools, or puts toys in his/her mouth that other children may in turn pick up and play with or place in their mouths.

Want more information?

Additional information can be provided to you by your health care provider. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please call 202-442-5842.

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