



Cold Sores (Oral Herpes)

Understanding Cold Sores, Their Causes, and How They Are Managed

What Are Cold Sores?

Cold sores, also called **fever blisters** or **herpes labialis**, are small, fluid-filled blisters that usually develop on or around the lips. They are caused by the **herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1)**.

Cold sores are very common worldwide. After the initial infection, the virus remains inactive (dormant) in the body and may become active again later, causing recurrent outbreaks.

Although cold sores often heal without treatment, they are **contagious** while active.

What Causes Cold Sores?

Cold sores are caused by infection with **herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1)**.

Most people are exposed to HSV-1 during childhood or early adulthood.

After the initial infection, the virus remains in nearby nerve cells and may reactivate from time to time.

How Is HSV-1 Spread?

HSV-1 spreads through direct contact with infected saliva or skin.

Examples include:

- Kissing
- Sharing drinking glasses
- Sharing eating utensils
- Sharing lip balm
- Close skin-to-skin contact during an active outbreak

The virus spreads most easily when blisters are present but can occasionally spread even when no sores are visible.

Common Triggers

Several factors may trigger a recurrence, including:

- Emotional stress
- Fever or illness
- Sun exposure
- Fatigue
- Hormonal changes
- Injury to the lips
- A weakened immune system

Triggers vary from person to person.

Symptoms

Many people notice early warning signs before a blister appears.

These may include:

- Tingling
- Burning
- Itching
- Mild pain

Within one to two days, small fluid-filled blisters usually develop.

The blisters eventually:

- Break open
 - Form a crust
 - Heal over the following one to two weeks
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First Infection vs. Recurrent Outbreaks

The **first HSV-1 infection** may be more severe than later outbreaks.

Some people experience:

- Multiple sores
- Fever
- Swollen lymph nodes
- Sore throat
- General fatigue

Later outbreaks are usually smaller and heal more quickly.

Are Cold Sores Contagious?

Yes.

Cold sores are **highly contagious**, especially while blisters are present.

To reduce the risk of spreading the virus:

- Avoid kissing.
- Do not share cups, utensils, towels, or lip products.
- Wash your hands after touching the sore.
- Avoid touching your eyes after touching a sore.

Children, newborns, and people with weakened immune systems may be more vulnerable to complications.

Cold Sores vs. Canker Sores

Although they are commonly confused, they are different conditions.

Cold Sores	Canker Sores
Caused by HSV-1	Not caused by a virus
Contagious	Not contagious
Usually occur on the lips or around the mouth	Occur inside the mouth
Begin as blisters	Begin as ulcers
May recur throughout life	Usually heal without viral recurrence

How Are Cold Sores Diagnosed?

Most cold sores are diagnosed by:

- Medical history
- Physical examination

Laboratory testing is usually unnecessary but may be recommended in unusual or severe cases.

Treatment

There is **no cure** for HSV-1.

Treatment focuses on reducing symptoms and shortening the duration of outbreaks.

Your healthcare provider may recommend:

- Antiviral creams
- Oral antiviral medications
- Pain-relieving medications
- Keeping the affected area clean and dry

Antiviral medications work best when started **as early as possible**, ideally during the tingling stage before blisters fully develop.

Can Cold Sores Be Prevented?

Although outbreaks cannot always be prevented, you may reduce the risk by:

- Using lip balm with sunscreen
- Managing stress
- Getting adequate sleep
- Avoiding known personal triggers
- Beginning antiviral medication early if prescribed by your healthcare provider

People with frequent outbreaks may benefit from preventive antiviral therapy.

When Should You See a Healthcare Provider?

Seek medical or dental evaluation if:

- A sore lasts longer than **two weeks**
- Outbreaks occur very frequently
- The sore spreads to the eyes
- You have a weakened immune system
- Eating or drinking becomes difficult
- Symptoms are severe or accompanied by high fever

Eye involvement requires prompt medical attention because HSV infection can affect vision.

Common Myths

"Cold sores are caused by cold weather."

False.

Cold sores are caused by the herpes simplex virus. Cold weather itself does not cause infection, although certain environmental factors may trigger outbreaks in some individuals.

"Once a cold sore heals, the virus is gone."

False.

HSV-1 remains in the body and may reactivate later.

"Cold sores and canker sores are the same thing."

False.

Cold sores are caused by a contagious virus, while canker sores are non-contagious ulcers that develop inside the mouth.

Key Takeaways

- ✓ Cold sores are caused by herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1).
- ✓ They usually appear on or around the lips.
- ✓ Cold sores are contagious, especially while blisters are present.
- ✓ Antiviral medications can shorten outbreaks when started early.
- ✓ The virus remains in the body after infection and may cause future outbreaks.
- ✓ Persistent, severe, or eye-related symptoms require prompt medical evaluation.

References

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