

Q. What causes cold sores and what is the best way to get rid of them?

A. Cold sores are caused by an infection of the herpes simplex virus (HSV). Once you have been infected, the virus lives in nerve cells in your skin for the rest of your life and you can't get rid of it. However, you can decrease their recurrence by taking precautions as well as decreasing the risk of spread to other parts of your body or other individuals.

A cold sore erupts – usually on the lip or around the nose – when the immune has been weakened or due to a fever caused by the flu or the common cold (thus the name “cold sores”). There are other triggers that can also increase the likelihood of a cold sore erupting including:

- Excessive sun exposure on the face and lips
- High levels of stress, which perhaps lowers the immune system
- Fatigue (again, lowering the immune system)
- Menstruation

Here are steps you can take to prevent cold sores or their frequent recurrence:

1. Avoid kissing and skin contact with people while blisters are present. This is how they are usually spread to other people.



2. Avoid sharing eating utensils, towels, lip balm, and other such items from a person who has an active cold sore.

3. If you have an active cold sore, **keep your hands washed and clean** before touching other people or other parts of your body (such as eyes or genitals) to keep the infection from spreading.

4. Avoid triggers such as excessive sun exposure. Apply sun block or lip balm with SPF 15+ to your face and lips any time you will be exposed to the sun for very long – both summer and winter. Avoid getting overly tired or overly stressed.

Taking vitamin C, or lysine supplements, or using a lip balm may help provide some relief during an outbreak. Most cold sores heal on their own after 2 weeks. If you have frequent or very painful cold sores, your doctor can prescribe an antiviral medication such as Acyclovir® that can help decrease the duration of the outbreak if it's taken very early in the outbreak. If you have this medicine on hand and can take it at the very first sign of an outbreak (such as tingling on the lip where the sore usually appears), it can be quite effective. Once the sore has developed, the medicine is usually not very helpful.

It's important to see your doctor if the cold sore develops and you have a weakened immune system from some other condition, if the cold sore is very painful, continues for more than 2 weeks, or you experience eye irritation with the cold sore.

