



Cold Sores

Patient information leaflet



GIG
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NHS
WALES



Common Ailments Service

Only use this leaflet if your pharmacist has advised you about your or your child's condition.

Cold sores are small blisters that can appear anywhere on the face, but often develop around the lips and nose. They are caused by a virus called herpes simplex. The blisters usually clear up without treatment within 10 to 14 days.

Cold sores start with a tingling, itching or burning feeling. They develop into fluid-filled blisters over the next 48 hours. The blisters usually scab over and heal without leaving scars. They may be irritating or painful while they heal, and are contagious until they have completely healed.

After you have had a cold sore, the virus stays in your body for the rest of your life. Some people only have a cold sore once. Other people get cold sores often and may find that certain things trigger them, such as sunlight, colds and flu, tiredness or stress.



A cold sore blister



A cold sore scabbed over



Treatment and Prevention

Self-care at home

To help yourself feel better:

- drink plenty of fluids to stay hydrated
- eat cool, soft foods
- use **paracetamol** or **ibuprofen** to treat the pain and fever (if suitable for you – ask your pharmacist if you are unsure)
- aim to avoid known triggers such as sunlight, stress, extreme hot or cold, tiredness or trauma to the area
- try sunscreen lip balm (SPF 15 or more) if your cold sores are triggered by the sun

Cold sores are contagious from the time they start until they have completely healed. You catch them by having direct skin contact with the cold sore. If your child has a cold sore, there is no need to keep them off school if they are well.

To avoid spreading cold sores:

- wash your hands with soap and water after touching the cold sore
- do not kiss other people while you have a cold sore
- do not share cold sore creams, cutlery, towels, lip balms or other items that may recently have come into contact with an oozing or unhealed cold sore
- do not perform oral sex until the cold sores have completely healed – the cold sore virus also causes genital herpes
- wash your hands before handling your contact lenses if you wear them, or wear glasses instead until your cold sore has completely healed



Treatment and Prevention

Be particularly careful around newborn babies, pregnant women, and anyone who has a weakened immune system from cancer therapy, steroid therapy or other medicines or conditions. The infection may be worse in these people.

Medicines that can help

These medicines are not suitable for everyone. Make sure you have asked your pharmacist for advice about what treatment is best for you or your child.

Antiviral creams are available to buy. How well they work is uncertain, but some people find that they help. The cream works best if you use it as soon as the symptoms start and before your blisters first appear. Your pharmacist can provide you with more advice.

Always read the patient information leaflet that comes with your medicine.

If you are concerned about any side effects from a treatment, report it to a doctor, nurse or pharmacist. You can also report side effects on the Yellow Card [app](#) or [website](#).



When to Get Help

Contact your GP or call 111 if:

- your cold sore is not any better after 10 days
- your cold sore is increasing in size, very painful, or is spreading to other areas of your skin
- you are pregnant
- your newborn baby (under 6 months) has cold sores
- you have a weakened immune system, for example from cancer treatment or steroid therapy
- you have cold sores more than 6 times a year
- new cold sores are appearing after the first outbreak
- you have a high temperature that will not go down
- you cannot eat or drink because of your cold sore
- you have swollen, painful gums, ulcers, or red or white patches, inside your mouth
- you also have a hoarse voice or a lump inside your mouth

If you are worried that your or your child's condition is not getting better, or is getting worse, talk to your GP.



More information

For more information on cold sores or a medicine, talk to your pharmacist or look at the following websites:

NHS 111 Wales: <https://111.wales.nhs.uk/Coldsore/>

Patient UK: <https://patient.info/childrens-health/viral-skin-infections-leaflet/cold-sores>

British Association of Dermatologists: <https://www.bad.org.uk/pils/herpes-simplex/>

Herpes Viruses Association: <https://herpes.org.uk/cold-sores/>

Medicines A-Z: <https://www.nhs.uk/medicines/>

Information from the above resources is included in this leaflet.



Mae'r daflen hon hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg. This leaflet is also available in Welsh.

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