Cold Sores

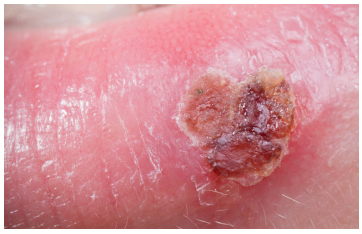
Patient information leaflet

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 form around the lips and nose. They are caused by a virus called herpes simplex. The blisters usually clear up without treatment within 7 to 10 days.

A cold sore blister



A cold sore scabbed over

Cold sores start with a tingling, itching or burning feeling. They develop into fluid-filled blisters over the next 2 days. Once the blisters burst, they scab over and usually heal without leaving scars. They may be irritating or painful while they heal. They 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. Things like sunlight, colds and flu, tiredness or stress can trigger them.

Treatment and Prevention

Self-care at home

To help yourself feel better:

- drink plenty of fluids to stay hydrated
- eat cool, soft foods
- aim to avoid known triggers such as sunlight, stress, extreme heat or cold, tiredness or injury 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. If you have a beard, you should avoid shaving while you have a cold sore.

To avoid spreading cold sores:

- wash your hands with soap and water before and after touching the cold sore
- do not kiss other people while you have a cold sore. This is especially important for babies under 3 months old, pregnant women and anyone with a weakened immune system
- do not share items that may recently have come in to contact with an unhealed cold sore. This includes cold sore creams, cutlery, towels, lip balms or other items
- wash your hands before handling your contact lenses if you wear them. Do not use saliva to moisten contact lenses. You could wear glasses instead until your cold sore has completely healed

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.

Treatment and Prevention

Pain relief
Use **paracetamol** or **ibuprofen** to treat the pain and fever (38°C or above) if suitable for you – ask your pharmacist if you are unsure.

Antiviral creams are available to buy. It is not clear how well they work, but some people find them helpful. They work best if you use it as soon as the symptoms start and before your blisters first appear. You should gently dab it on instead of rubbing it in. This will help to stop damage to the blisters, which may hurt or spread germs. Make sure you wash your hands before and after putting it on. Your pharmacist can provide you with more advice.

Always read the patient information leaflet that comes with your medicine.
If you think a medicine is causing side effects, tell a doctor, nurse or pharmacist. You can also report side effects using the Yellow Card app or at yellowcard.mhra.gov.uk

When to Get Help

Ask for a routine **GP appointment** if you or your child's:

- cold sore is not any better after 5 to 7 days

Ask for an urgent **GP appointment** or **call 111** if you or your child:

- have a cold sore that is increasing in size, very painful, or is spreading to other areas of your skin (such as your neck, genitals or eyes)
- have new cold sores that are appearing after the first outbreak
- have a high temperature that will not go down
- cannot eat or drink because of your cold sore
- have swollen, painful gums, ulcers, or red or white patches, inside your mouth
- have a hoarse voice or a lump inside your mouth

If you have a cold sore and think you have infected your eye, you should see your optometrist.
Talk to your GP if you or your child is not getting better or is getting worse.

More information

For more information on cold sores or a medicine, talk to your pharmacist or visit the following websites:
NHS 111 Wales: 111.wales.nhs.uk/Coldsore
Patient UK: patient.info/childrens-health/viral-skin-infections-leaflet/cold-sores
British Association of Dermatologists: www.bad.org.uk/pils/herpes-simplex/
Medicines A-Z: 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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