



## HEALTH INFORMATION

# Cold Sores

About 1 in 5 people in the UK have recurring cold sores. Cold sores usually resolve on their own without treatment in 7-10 days.

## What are Cold sores

Cold sores are caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). Most cold sores are caused by the type 1 strain (HSV1). The type 2 strain (HSV2) usually causes genital herpes but very occasionally can cause cold sores around the mouth.

After the first infection, the virus settles in a nearby nerve sheath and remains there for the rest of your life. For most of the time, the virus lies dormant (inactive) and causes no symptoms. However, in some people the virus becomes active from time to time. When activated, the virus multiplies and travels down the nerve sheath to cause cold sore blisters around the mouth.

## What are the symptoms of a cold sore

You may feel a tingle or itch before the blisters appear, usually around your lips or nose. This can last several hours, or up to a day or so. After the tingle, one or more blisters appear which are usually sore. The blisters contain fluid that is the herpes virus. The blisters may weep and take several days to scab. Cold sores can be very tender and painful.

Until the cold sores have scabbed over and are completely dry, the cold sore is very infectious and can be spread to other people. Some virus will remain dormant in the nerve sheath ready to cause another cold sore sometime in the future.

## Treatment

- Try not to touch or pick cold sores. Only touch cold sores when applying topical creams.
- Creams, gels and other topical treatments should be dabbed on the cold sores rather than rubbed in. This is to minimise damage to the blisters which may spread the virus around, or cause more pain by breaking the blisters or scabs.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after touching cold sores and after applying creams to them.
- Pain can be eased by painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen.
- A pharmacist can advise a soothing cream or gel. Again, it is important not to share these treatments.

## Treatment Creams

### Antiviral creams

Aciclovir - **Zovirax®** and Penciclovir - **Vectavir®**, can be bought over-the-counter (OTC) at pharmacies, or be prescribed by a doctor. These do not kill the virus, but prevent the virus from multiplying.

### Antiviral tablets

Aciclovir is also available in tablet form.