

Give cold sores the cold shoulder

Cold sores – those bothersome blisters that appear around the mouth – can be painful and embarrassing. Cold sores are spread by a virus, but not the cold virus.

Cold sores happen when a person gets infected with the herpes simplex virus (HSV). This is why cold sores may also be called “oral herpes.” HSV is very contagious. It can be easily spread person to person by:

- Sharing drinks or utensils
- Kissing
- Touching a cold sore or infected person’s face, and then touching your face
- Touching an infected person’s face and then touching someone else (this is how many babies get HSV)
- Sharing personal items like razors or towels
- Intimate or sexual contact
- Touching the same object that was touched by a person with a cold sore.

The type of HSV that causes cold sores is usually HSV type 1. Another type of HSV, known as HSV type 2, is most often spread through sexual contact. HSV type 2 is the virus that usually causes genital herpes. But, either type of HSV can cause cold sores or genital herpes.



What triggers cold sores?

Once you get HSV, there is no cure. It stays in the body forever and it may cause repeated outbreaks of cold sores. Certain things may trigger a cold sore outbreak. Things that bring down the body’s defenses may allow the virus to become active and produce a cold sore again. Many people get cold sores due to:

- Stress
- Hormone changes such as menstruation or pregnancy
- Illnesses, like the flu or a cold
- Sun exposure
- Certain foods



Don’t spread cold sores!

Even if you stay healthy and avoid stress, there is no way to prevent all cold sore outbreaks. So, it’s best to try and avoid spreading cold sores and HSV to others.

The best way to avoid spreading cold sores is to wash your hands frequently and avoid contact that could spread the sore. If you feel a cold sore coming on, don’t share drinks and other items listed in this article. Avoid touching your mouth and don’t touch people’s faces or kiss people, especially babies, children and people with weakened immune systems.



Treating cold sores

If you get cold sores frequently, ask your doctor about medicines that can help. Some antiviral medicines can reduce the number of outbreaks. They also help lower the chance of spreading HSV to others.

Some over-the-counter medicines can also help speed up the healing time of a sore, but they won’t prevent outbreaks or stop the spread of HSV. Ask your doctor if one of these treatments might work for you.



Sources: American Academy of Pediatrics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institutes of Health