Oral Herpes Simplex Infections (Cold Sores)

WHAT ARE COLD SORES?
Cold sores are painful blisters of the mouth and lips caused by the Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV). There are two types of HSV, type 1 and 2.

■ HSV-1 prefers the mouth and lips and is responsible for most cold sores.
  • Having an HSV-1 infection in the mouth usually does not mean you have a sexually transmitted infection. However, HSV-1 can occasionally be transmitted to the genital area through oral sex.
  • HSV-1 can also infect other skin surfaces (like the face, neck, and fingers), the eyes, and rarely, the brain.

■ HSV-2 prefers the genitals and is the most common cause of genital herpes. Occasionally HSV-2 can result in cold sores when it is transferred to the mouth via oral sex.

WHO IS AT RISK?
Up to 90% of all people worldwide have been infected with HSV-1. However, not everyone will have symptoms or even know that they are infected. Up to 15% of adults may excrete the virus at any time.

Groups at higher risk for infection include:
  • Healthcare workers
  • Athletes in sports with frequent skin-to-skin contact (eg. wrestlers)
  • People with frequent open skin lesions (eg. eczema, acne)
  • People with weakened immune systems (eg. from HIV and other causes)

HOW DOES INFECTION SPREAD?
HSV-1 is easily spread from person to person. Transmission is possible even if no symptoms are present.
  • The virus is usually spread by direct skin-to-skin contact, such as kissing.
  • It can also be spread by sharing utensils, razors, etc.
  • An infected person can transmit the virus from one site of their body to another; this is called auto-transmission.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?
Classic symptoms include the sudden onset of painful blisters on the mouth, lips, and/or tongue. Lesions may also appear on the nose or throat. The blisters will eventually pop and form scabs.

The initial infection is usually the most severe.
  • Blisters are typically accompanied by fever, headache, muscle aches, and/or swollen lymph nodes.
  • However, up to 75% of infected persons have no symptoms with their initial infection.

Recurrent infections tend to be milder than the initial outbreak.
  • Many patients have no symptoms.
  • Some patients experience a prodrome consisting of pain, tingling, or itching at the site of infection about a day before blisters appear.
  • Sometimes only the prodromal symptoms are present, and blisters never develop.

Cold sores can sometimes be confused with canker sores, which are also painful but do not blister or scab over. The cause of canker sores is unknown.
WHAT ARE COMMON TRIGGERS?
Cold sores can be triggered by physical and emotional stressors. Examples include:
- Exposure to sunlight; sunburn to the face or lips
- Skin irritation (eg. from skin products, foods, braces, lip biting, chapped lips, etc.)
- Sudden changes in temperature or weather
- Emotional stress (eg. school/work stress, lack of sleep, finances, relationships, etc.)

WHEN SHOULD I SEEK MEDICAL CARE?
See your medical provider if your symptoms are severe or if you are having trouble eating and/or drinking.
Seek medical attention IMMEDIATELY if you have any of the following:
- Severe headache, fever, seizures, altered neurologic functions, including impaired consciousness/cognition and changes in balance
- Diffuse spreading of the blisters or pustules, especially to the face or mouth.
- Blisters on or near the eye.
- Eye symptoms, such as redness, pain, sensitivity to light, changes in vision, and persistent tearing.

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?
Most of the time, cold sores can be diagnosed by their appearance alone. Labs are available to confirm the diagnosis if needed.
- Swabbing an open blister for culture within 24-48 hours of symptom onset allows for identification of the virus and its type (1 or 2).
- Blood tests for antibodies to HSV may be considered after the 24-48 hour window period. However, false negative results can occur.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT?
Most people who have mild symptoms do not need specific treatment.
- Pain and discomfort may be controlled with over-the-counter pain pills or oral gels.
- Sucking on ice or popsicles may also decrease pain.
Antiviral medications may be considered for more severe infections. These medicines cannot cure HSV, but they can decrease the severity and duration of symptoms, as well as reduce transmission to others.
- Acyclovir and Valacyclovir are the most commonly used oral antiviral medications. Only antiviral pills (not creams like Abreva and Zovirax) have been shown to be effective against HSV.
- These medications should be started as soon as symptoms develop.
- Patients with frequent outbreaks may be given suppressive therapy with a daily antiviral medication to reduce both recurrence and transmission risks.

HOW DO I PREVENT THE SPREAD OF INFECTION?
Remember that you can transmit the virus even if you have no symptoms. Use excellent personal hygiene at all times. Avoid picking at any skin lesions, such as acne or eczema.
If blisters or other symptoms are present,
- Avoid touching the skin in question.
- If you touch any skin lesions, wash and dry your hands thoroughly.
- Avoid close skin-to-skin contact with others, including kissing and giving oral sex.
- Do not share utensils, cups, towels, lip balm, etc.
- Do not shave until symptoms resolve. Use a new your razor, and do not share razors.
- Notify your healthcare provider if you are pregnant.

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