

## What treatment is available?

There is no cure for herpes, but there are medications that can help speed the healing process and control symptoms.

### Topical therapy

Two topical antiviral medications are available by prescription for oral herpes: acyclovir cream (*brand name Zovirax® Cream*) and penciclovir cream (*brand name Denavir®*). These topical medicines are put directly on herpes sores or can be used during the early warning signs. Both may speed the healing process, ease pain and soreness and reduce viral activity.

Abreva® is FDA-approved for use without a prescription. It can shorten an outbreak and provide relief from pain. Many other or non-prescription topical treatments are available at your drug store. But these treatments do not have antiviral activity and will not shorten the time you have a sore.

### Oral Therapy (Prescription Medications)

Antiviral medications taken orally are sometimes used to treat cold sores. Valacyclovir (*brand name Valtrex®*), is approved as a one-day course of treatment that can reduce the time it takes cold sores to heal.

### What's the difference between oral and genital herpes?

The terms "oral herpes" and "genital herpes" describe where on the body the herpes sores appear. A person can have oral herpes or genital herpes or both. Getting genital herpes requires some type of sexual activity, while oral herpes can be passed through kissing.

Usually oral herpes is caused by HSV-1 and genital herpes is caused by HSV-2 since these are the preferred sites for each of the two virus types. However, HSV-1 can also cause genital herpes, usually transmitted by oral sex. It is uncommon for HSV-2 to cause oral herpes and if it does, it usually causes few to no symptoms.

Latex condoms, when used consistently and correctly, are effective at reducing the risk of transmission of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, if the condom covers the affected area or site of potential exposure. To reduce risk of transmission of herpes, couples should abstain from sexual intercourse during an outbreak.

ASHA's STI Resource Center provides up-to-date, sensitive and accurate information about all aspects of herpes.

**STI Resource Center**

**1-800-227-8922**

**Monday - Friday, 9 am to 6 pm EST**

[www.ASHAst.org](http://www.ASHAst.org)

[www.iwannaknow.org](http://www.iwannaknow.org) (for teens)

[www.quierosaber.org](http://www.quierosaber.org) (en español)

Since 1914, the **American Social Health Association (ASHA)** has been dedicated to improving the health of individuals, families, and communities, with a focus on preventing sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and their harmful consequences. ASHA has pursued its mission through education, communication, advocacy and policy analysis activities. These are designed to heighten public, patient, provider, policymaker and media awareness of STI prevention, screening, diagnosis and treatment strategies.

The American Social Health Association (ASHA) publishes this and other materials to provide a valuable resource for accurate medical information and emotional support for those affected by sexually transmitted infections.

If you are a healthcare provider and wish to order a free catalog of patient education materials, please call 1-800-783-9877.

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# Questions & Answers about ORAL HERPES



American Social Health Association

America's trusted authority on  
sexually transmitted infections  
since 1914

[www.ASHAst.org](http://www.ASHAst.org)

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## What is oral herpes?

Oral herpes is a common and usually mild skin condition that comes and goes. It is often referred to as a “cold sore” or “fever blister.” You have most likely seen someone with oral herpes sores before, or you may have had one yourself.



Oral herpes is caused by the herpes simplex virus, or HSV. There are two types: herpes simplex virus type 1 (*HSV-1*) and herpes simplex virus type 2 (*HSV-2*). Oral herpes is almost always caused by HSV-1, while HSV-2 is the most common cause of genital herpes.

Oral herpes usually is a mild infection in healthy people. A common concern is that it affects your appearance since it causes blisters and crusted sores near the mouth and is difficult to hide.

Another fact about oral herpes is that HSV stays in the body after the sores have healed. The virus is silent or inactive most of the time, but it is still present. Because the virus remains in the body, some people have outbreaks of oral herpes sores from time to time. The sores tend to become less severe, and less frequent, with time.

Many people with oral herpes learn to recognize, and sometimes avoid, the things that can cause sores to appear. These include stress, exposure to the sun, a fever or cold (*which is why oral herpes has the names “fever blister” and “cold sore”*), chapped lips or other skin trauma, or menstrual periods in a woman. Taking care of yourself can help. Different things to do might include limiting how much sun you get by always using a “sun block” on your lips and face, and getting enough sleep.

### Oral Herpes & Children

Most people contract oral herpes as children or adolescents, often by receiving a kiss from a friend or relative. If your child shows symptoms of oral herpes the sore should heal within 2 to 12 days. But, if you are concerned, see your child’s health care provider.

When sores are present, do not allow your child to share toys or eating utensils with others, even though the likelihood of getting herpes from a toy is low.

## How common is oral herpes?

Most people get oral herpes when they are children or teenagers, often by receiving a kiss from a friend or relative with active oral herpes. Even though most adults in the United States have oral herpes, not everyone has had a visible sore and many don’t know they have the virus. By age 50, about 80-90 percent of people have oral herpes.

## What are the signs and symptoms of oral herpes?

The first time a person has herpes anywhere on the body it is called a *primary infection*. For oral herpes, the primary infection usually causes mild or no symptoms. But some people have a severe primary infection with fever and painful sores on the face (*around the mouth, nose or cheek*), or sometimes in the mouth. The sores typically begin as fluid-filled blisters that may appear as a single sore or a group of sores. Over a few days, or sometimes weeks, the blisters break, develop a crust, and eventually heal.

At least 1 in 4 people with oral herpes experience periodic sores. The symptoms will vary from person to person and are usually mild and may even go unnoticed. Symptoms might easily be mistaken for another problem, for example a small crack or cut in the skin, chapped lips, a bug bite or a pimple. The frequency of sores varies from person to person and tends to lessen over time.

Some people experience a “prodrome,” or warning signs a day or two prior to seeing a sore. This is usually an itching, tingling, or painful sensation in the area where the sore will develop.

## How is oral herpes diagnosed?

A health care provider will diagnose oral herpes most often simply by looking at the “tell-tale” signs. For a definite diagnosis, a culture test (*a swab from the blister or sore*) should be done within the first 48 hours after it appears. Results are usually available in about a week. For more information on testing, go to the ASHA website at [www.ASHAstd.org](http://www.ASHAstd.org).

Also, try to keep your child from touching the herpes sore and then rubbing his or her eyes. Washing your child’s hands with soap and water is sufficient to remove the herpes virus.

Finally, remember that most people have oral herpes because kissing is so common. Anyone who has ever kissed could have oral herpes. Children and parents with oral herpes are still encouraged to kiss and to give and receive affection from each other (*except when sores are present*.)

## How is oral herpes spread?

Oral herpes is spread through skin-to-skin contact. Damage to the skin surface, such as a small cut (*even if you cannot see it*), makes spreading oral herpes easier.

The risk of spreading oral herpes is highest during the stage when blisters or open sores are present. But herpes can also be transmitted when there are no symptoms present. This is because HSV can be present on the skin around the mouth even when there are no symptoms. This does not happen often, but can occur several days each year.

A person with herpes sores on or around the mouth should not kiss other people until the skin has healed and looks normal again.

Although herpes is spread primarily through skin-to-skin contact, many experts recommend not sharing glasses, forks or spoons or personal items such as razors while sores are present. It is also a good idea not to touch your herpes sores directly because there is a possibility of passing the virus to other parts of the body. The herpes virus is killed easily with soap and water, so washing will remove any virus that gets on your hands or fingers.

Be aware that oral herpes can be passed from the mouth to a partner’s genital area during oral sex. Anyone with an oral herpes sore should not perform oral sex on a partner while any sores are present. Using a condom or dental dam (*a flat piece of latex that can be used to cover the vagina*) for oral sex provides a physical barrier to reduce the risk of spreading the virus.

## Are there complications of oral herpes?

Herpes is a skin condition that rarely causes further problems. A person with oral herpes can sometimes have frequent or severe symptoms, and can benefit from antiviral treatment.

Newborn infants can get a very severe herpes infection. Anyone with herpes sores should make sure not to kiss a newborn infant. Also, people who have immune system problems (*caused by such things as HIV infection or AIDS, treatment for cancer, or an organ transplant*) may require special treatment.

Herpes infection of the eye, or ocular herpes, is uncommon but needs immediate medical help to avoid permanent damage to the eye. Herpes infection of the eye may occur from your own oral herpes infection – for example, by rubbing your eye after touching your herpes sore.