

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1)



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Public Health
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Burlington County Health Department
Health Starts Here

What is herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1)?

There are different types of herpes viruses. HSV-1 is one type of herpes virus that causes infections of the lips, mouth, and face. HSV-1 often causes painful, fluid-filled blisters, known as “cold sores”, inside the mouth or on the lips. It is the most common herpes simplex virus and most people develop it in childhood.

What are the symptoms of HSV-1?

Symptoms of HSV-1 include mouth sores, blisters or ulcers on the mouth, lips, and gums. Many people feel a burning, itching, or tingling sensation around their lips for a day or so before the cold sore appears. Signs and symptoms vary from person to person, and if this is your first outbreak or a repeat one. During first-time outbreaks, some people get fever, sore throat, headache, muscle aches, and swollen lymph nodes. Repeat outbreaks typically occur in the same spot each time and tend to be less severe than the first outbreak.

How is HSV-1 spread?

Most people get HSV-1 while they are young. It is spread person to person through direct contact with infected saliva or an open cold sore. You can get HSV-1 by sharing food or drink or kissing someone with HSV-1. Cold sores are most contagious when oozing blisters are present.

Who gets HSV-1?

HSV-1 is very common. It is estimated that nearly 90% of adults worldwide test positive for the virus, even if they do not show any symptoms.

Is HSV-1 dangerous?

HSV-1 is a very common infection that is usually not dangerous. However, people who have weakened immune systems are at a higher risk of complications from the virus. For newborns, children with eczema, and people who have a weak immune system due to cancer, organ transplant, or HIV infection, HSV-1 infection may result in severe complications. For some people, HSV-1 leads to issues in other areas of the body:

- Fingertips- causes an abscess in the soft tissue near the fingernail
- Eyes- the virus can cause eye infections. Repeated infections can lead to blindness or vision problems
- Widespread areas of the skin- People with eczema are at a higher risk for cold sores spreading all across their bodies
- Other organs- In people with weakened immune systems, the virus can affect the spinal cord and brain

How is HSV-1 diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask you about your symptoms and medical history, and examine the blisters. Usually the doctor can easily diagnose a cold sore by looking at it. To confirm the diagnosis, the healthcare provider may take a small sample of the sore to test it for HSV-1 in a laboratory.

How is HSV-1 treated?

Cold sores will usually go away on their own within 2 to 4 week. A primary infection with HSV-1 may last for 3 to 14 days. There are some over the counter drugs and creams that can shorten the length of time an HSV-1 cold sore lasts and make them less painful. However, once you are infected with HSV-1, there is no way to get rid of the virus completely. After the initial infection, the virus will go “dormant”, meaning you will not have any symptoms. However, if you become stressed, tired, ill, or have excessive sun exposure, HSV-1 cold sores may reappear. For people who have a large number of outbreaks or those who have a severe case, prescription antiviral drugs may be prescribed by a doctor. These medications do not completely get rid of the virus, but can suppress it enough that will limit the number of future outbreaks, decrease the severity of an outbreak, or may even prevent any future outbreak.

Can HSV-1 be prevented?

Preventing HSV-1 is difficult since people can spread the virus even when they don't have any symptoms of an active cold sore. However, there are some things you can do to decrease your chance of getting HSV-1 such as avoid skin contact, kissing, or sharing food, drink, or personal items with people with active cold sores. If you have HSV-1, take the same precautions to prevent giving it to an uninfected person. Wash your hand carefully before touching yourself and other people.

How do I prevent future outbreaks if I have HSV-1?

To prevent recurring cold sores or blisters:

- avoid long periods of time in the sun and use sun block on your lips and face while in the sun
- get adequate rest and relaxation to minimize stress
- talk to your healthcare provider about medications that may help reduce the number of active cold sores you experience

Not every person that has an outbreak of HSV-1 will have recurring outbreaks. It is important to take care of your overall health to minimize the chances of repeat outbreaks.

Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic
- The Mayo Clinic website at: <http://www.mayoclinic.org>
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.cdc.gov/>
- The Burlington County Department of Health at (609)-265-5533
- The New Jersey Department of Health(NJDOH) at 1-800-624-2377 or on the NJDOH Website at <http://www.nj.gov/health/>