

Cold Sores? Take care to minimize the misery

By Dr. Eric Gustavsen, Published in the Walla Walla Union Bulletin 8/24/12

It begins with a tingling in the lower lip, swollen lymph nodes, and perhaps elevated temperature. The dreaded symptoms! The tingling is followed by pain and sprouting of an unwelcome sore on the lip.

Cold sores are the result of infection with the herpes simplex virus 1 or HSV1. (Herpes simplex 2 typically inhabits the genital area but either virus will invade the others' territory.) Typical outbreaks of HSV1 occur on the lower lip following an illness, stressful event, trauma to the lip, overexposure to the sun, and for some people, long dental appointments.

Cold sores are very contagious! I well remember a class I took while at Loma Linda University School of Dentistry where a picture was presented showing three rascally little brothers with identical sores on their lower lip. Our Irish teacher asked us "What could have caused unsightly sores on these wee children?" Answer: Grandma coming for a visit with an active cold sore and kissing each child. Scary!

The virus is usually transmitted by kissing, but also be careful not to share eating utensils, drinking glasses, toothbrushes (not that you would intentionally) and even towels with others. Rubbing a cold sore with your finger could transfer the virus from your finger to your eye or any other part of the body your finger touches causing further misery.

A question that often arises is "How long is the virus contagious?" For most people these sores usually take 7 to 10 days to heal. If you can see the sore it's definitely contagious and it's wise to avoid kissing for a few days after the sore goes away. For the young and frisky, always avoid so called "intimate" contact as it can lead to a lifetime of genital herpes for your partner.

What treatments can help speed up the healing time? If you suffer from frequent outbreaks you should get a prescription from your dentist or medical doctor for an antiviral cream/paste such as Denavir or Zovirax.

Applying this cream on the lip at the first sign of tingling will, for most people, stall the impending

outbreak or at least considerably shorten its duration. The cream however is quite expensive so if you don't have insurance coverage you may want to try an over the counter medication such as Abreva or Viroxyn first.

A home remedy that works for some people is placing ice on the lip at the first sign of tingling. This may drive the virus back into hiding if pursued for long enough. For some individuals healing is faster keeping the blister moist with Vaseline and for others drying it out with an alcohol based product like Viroxyn seems to work better. Results seem to vary depending on the person.

For those prone to cold sores and facing some stressful high profile event such as a graduation, wedding or appearance on Americas' Got Talent, you may want to get a prescription to stave off the inevitable cold sore and save yourself some misery.

Antiviral pills such as Valtrex (valacyclovir) or Zovirax (acyclovir) are the most predictable way to actually prevent an outbreak. And always remember to use a lip moisturizer with sunblock for your day in the sun.

And finally, if you are "looking forward to" extensive dental treatment and you know you are susceptible to cold sores your dentist can help you prevent them by prescribing a three day course of the antiviral pill called Zovirax. It would give you one less thing to worry about!

