

Cold sores (herpes simplex)

Cold sores are caused by the herpes simplex virus and are very common. About 20% of children will have been infected by the age of 5 years, and about 80% of people will have been infected by the time they are adults. Once a person is infected, the virus can reactivate and cause new cold sores throughout life.

Cold sores usually start with a tingling or burning sensation on or around the lips, followed by the appearance of small, painful blisters. The blisters break, form a scab and then heal, usually without leaving a scar. Cold sores usually last 3 to 7 days. Cold sores can appear on the eye if the person touches an active cold sore and then touches their eye. Although this is rare, any child with a painful red eye should be seen by a doctor.

How it spreads

Cold sores spread by direct contact with sores, especially when there is fluid in the blister. They can also spread by sharing anything that is put in the mouth, including dummies, food and drink containers, and eating utensils. Even if a person does not have a visible cold sore, they may still be able to infect others.

Exclusion period

Do not exclude a person with cold sores if they can maintain hygiene practices to minimise the risk of transmission. If the person cannot maintain these practices (for example, because they are too young), exclude them until the sores are dry. Cover sores with a dressing, where possible.

Actions for educators and other staff

Ensure staff and children have good hand hygiene.

Ensure staff use appropriate cleaning practices, as described in the *Staying healthy* guidelines.

Staff members with cold sores may need to be given duties that do not involve direct contact with children.

Actions for parents and carers

Cover the sores with a waterproof dressing (like a plastic adhesive strip), where possible.

If your child can wash their hands often and does not pick or scratch the sores, they can attend the service. If your child cannot do this, they should stay home until the sores are dry.

More information about cold sores

See healthdirect for more information on prevention, diagnosis and treatment of cold sores (healthdirect.gov.au/cold-sores).

To find out if a child needs medical help:

- use the online symptom checker (healthdirect.gov.au/symptom-checker)
- speak to a registered nurse by calling the 24-hour health advice hotline on 1800 022 222.