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Cold sores may not be a serious health condition but they are painful, definitely annoying and often embarrassing for those who get them. And, as all sufferers know, often the sores appear at the worst times.

We are all exposed to the cold sores virus but not all of us will experience an outbreak of the sores. Those who do usually get repeated attacks. Our first exposure to the virus is most likely in childhood. It tends to stay in our bodies, doing nothing until later in life when certain things trigger it to become active and cause cold sores to appear.

The virus responsible is called herpes simplex type one. It has nothing to do with the common cold virus but having a cold or the flu, or being run down from stress or some other illness can provide the perfect trigger for cold sores to develop. Sunburn is another common trigger.

Cold sores usually start out with a tingling, burning or itchy feeling on the skin where the sores eventually will appear – usually around the mouth or nose. A red swollen patch then develops over the next 24 hours which is often very painful and turns into a blister or a group of blisters. These crust over and dry-up after about a week, with the sores eventually healing completely and disappearing 10-14 days after the first tingle. The virus remains in your body until something like stress, an infection, or the common cold triggers it again and more cold sores develop – often in the same place as before.

Cold sores are transferred easily from person to person and can be particularly dangerous for babies, or for people taking medicines that affect their immune systems. Kissing is a common way of spreading the virus as well as sharing your eating and drinking utensils or face cloths and towels.

As further advice, people should wash their hands thoroughly after they have bathed and treated cold sores, or if they accidentally touch the sores. If your eyes become red, watery and sensitive to light, see your doctor straight away as the virus could have passed to your eyes.

You cannot be cured of the cold sores virus, but medicines to relieve symptoms of the actual sores are available. Aciclovir (Zovirax) is an anti-viral medicine that can speed up the healing time and even stop the sores from appearing, but usually only if used early enough in the cycle.

Clinical trials have shown that taking Lysine seems to reduce the recurrence of cold sores and may also reduce the severity and healing time. Lysine capsules are available or it is found in foods such as dairy and soy products, brewer's yeast and potatoes. Zinc may also be useful to keep cold sores away. Good food sources of zinc are lean red meat, brewer's yeast, egg yolk, kelp, soy products and fish.