

Cold sores ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I get cold sores around my mouth and nose all the time; I have since I can remember. I know that they can be caused by both physical illness and mental stress. Is there any way to reduce the frequency with which I get them, i.e., diet? Please help me, I feel like a leper.

Yours truly,
Jen

Answer

Dear Jen,

Cold sores can be painful and sometimes embarrassing to experience. However, they're common; so fear not, you aren't the only one! Cold sores (also called oral herpes or fever blisters) are little fluid-filled blisters that occur on and around the lips and are caused by the herpes simplex virus 1 (HSV-1). While there is no cure, there are ways you can help manage current outbreaks and reduce the likelihood or frequency of future ones. And, as you have experienced, if you've have cold sores once, they can reoccur again and again.

So, what causes these outbreaks? Some possible triggers could include:

- Infection or fever
- Hormone changes (such as those associated with menstruation)
- Stress
- Fatigue
- Exposure to the sun
- Changes to your immune system

Adapted from Mayo Clinic ^[2].

If you're experiencing an outbreak, the cold sores will most likely clear up in two to three weeks. You could also try a few at-home options to help you feel better such as lip balms and creams, over-the-counter cold sore remedies, or applying ice or a warm compress to the sores. If they

don't heal within two to three weeks, if the blisters are severe, or near your eyes, it's recommended that you contact a health care provider. They may prescribe an anti-viral medication to help reduce pain and clear up the outbreak sooner.

Even though there is no way to rid yourself from cold sores forever, there are some prevention methods you might consider trying:

- Apply sunscreen to the skin around your lips before heading out into the sun.
- Keep your lips moisturized by applying lip balm. You may look for lip balm containing zinc oxide to help protect them from the sun.
- Clean your hands regularly, as well as any household items that come into regular contact with your affected area.
- As stress and fatigue can be triggers, it may help to keep your stress levels in check and get plenty of rest.

While there isn't a diet that will prevent cold sore occurrences, eating a balanced diet could help you keep your immune system up and running, which may help to ward off cold sores. You might also want to check out more information on managing and preventing cold sores from the [National Institutes of Health](#) [3]. Here's to keeping your lips cold sore free!

Alice!

Category:

[General Health](#) [4]

[Skin Conditions](#) [5]

[Sexual & Reproductive Health](#) [6]

[Sexually Transmitted Infections \(STIs\)](#) [7]

[Herpes](#) [8]

Related questions

[What is herpes?](#) [9]

[Herpes info for women who have sex with women](#) [10]

[Herpes from a tanning bed?](#) [11]

[Okay to reuse bath towels?](#) [12]

Resources

[Medical Services \(Morningside\)](#) [13]

[Medical Services \(CUIMC\)](#) [14]

Published date:

Apr 19, 1996

Last reviewed on:

Sep 18, 2020

Footer menu

▼ [Contact Alice!](#)

- [Content Use](#)
- [Media Inquiries](#)
- [Comments & Corrections](#)
- ▼ [Syndication & Licensing](#)
 - [Licensing Q&As](#)
 - [Get Alice! on Your Website](#)
 - [Full Site Syndication](#)
 - [Link to Go Ask Alice!](#)

Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.

If you are in an urgent situation, please [visit our Emergency page](#) to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

Source URL: <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/cold-sores-17>

Links

- [1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/cold-sores-17>
- [2] <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/cold-sore/basics/definition/con-20021310?p=1>
- [3] <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000606.htm>
- [4] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/general-health>
- [5] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/skin-conditions>
- [6] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/sexual-reproductive-health>
- [7] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/sexually-transmitted-infections-stis>
- [8] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/herpes>
- [9] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/what-herpes-0>
- [10] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/herpes-info-women-who-have-sex-women>
- [11] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/herpes-tanning-bed-0>
- [12] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/okay-reuse-bath-towels>
- [13] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/medical-services-morningside>
- [14] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/medical-services-cuimc>