

Cold sores – not so cool

Around the time of Valentine's Day, our thoughts sometimes turn to romance; not quite so likely, perhaps, if you're affected with a cold sore.

To most people cold sores might seem to be a comparatively trivial condition; but if you are one of the thousands of people who suffer with cold sores you no doubt find them annoying beyond belief.

In warm summer weather, cold sores will be more common. Dry, burnt lips provide the ideal conditions for a cold sore to break out.

The good news is there are effective products to treat cold sores, and some excellent information from your local pharmacy on how to prevent them from occurring.

Pharmacies which provide Pharmacy *Self Care* health information have a recently up-dated "fact card" on cold sores. It tells you all you need to know, and more, about these annoying little skin infections - what cold sores are, how they occur, what medicines help and how best to use them.

Cold sores are caused by one of the viruses from the herpes family, known as herpes simplex (HSV). There are two types of HSV infections. HSV-1 usually causes infections on the face, such as cold sores around the lips and nose, whereas HSV-2 usually causes genital herpes.

The so-called tingle is the very first sign of the cold sore. This tingling, burning sensation occurs even before the actual cold sore appears. Topical antiviral preparations containing acyclovir or penciclovir will help if applied frequently and from the first sign of the lesion – that is when the itch or tingle is first noticed. Severe or recurrent cold sores respond well to oral antiviral medications, some of which are now available without prescription. Check with your pharmacist to see if they're suitable for you.

When the cold sore blisters burst open and begin to weep, the virus can be easily spread to other people. Products with an antibacterial effect, such as those containing povidone-iodine, are useful at this stage to help prevent the spread of infection.

Unfortunately, cold sores come back time after time because, as with all the herpes infections, the virus "hides" in the nerve cells in the skin at or near the original site. A range of triggers can then reactivate the virus to cause another cold sore – as well as sunburn, other triggers can include cold weather, fever, illness, and fatigue; in fact just about anything that puts our immune system under some stress.

There are formulations containing so-called immune system boosters: ascorbic acid, zinc and the amino acid lysine; but there is little evidence to support the use of herbal or vitamin products in the prevention and treatment of cold sores.

We are all exposed to the cold sore virus. Not all of us, however, will experience an outbreak of cold sores; but if you do get cold sores, then you're in good company. You're one of more than 4 million Australians – more than 20% of our population – who report having repeated attacks.

Cold sores are not the kind of condition that you can kiss better – kissing's a sure fire way of spreading them around so it's best avoided. As yet, there may be no permanent cure for cold sores; but you need to know how best to prevent them and how best to treat them when they do occur.

Phone the Pharmaceutical Society (PSA) on 1300 369 772 to find the nearest pharmacy providing the *Cold Sore* fact card or log onto the website www.psa.org.au Click on "Self Care" then "Use the Self Care Pharmacy Finder".