



Herpes Simplex

What causes herpes simplex?

Herpes simplex, commonly called cold sores, or fever blisters, may occur once or return again and again. It is caused by the herpes hominis virus. There are two kinds of herpes virus, type 1 and type 2. Type 1 virus causes the cold sores common on the lips and face. Herpes of the genital area is usually caused by type 2 virus.

Herpes simplex begins as a group of small red bumps that blister. You may have noticed itching or discomfort before the rash appeared. The blisters begin to dry up after a few days and form yellow crusts. The crusts gradually fall off and leave slowly fading red areas. The whole process takes about 10 to 14 days. No scar usually forms.

These mild symptoms are typical of recurring herpes simplex. The very first infection with type 1 herpes virus usually happens in childhood. It may go unrecognized, but often it causes fever, general illness, and much local soreness. Once you've had herpes simplex infection, the virus becomes permanently established in your nerve tissue. Recurring herpes results from activation of this virus. In between attacks it lives quietly in nerve tissue.

Fever and sun exposure are the most common factors triggering type 1 herpes simplex virus. That's when cold sores or fever blisters break out. Often no triggering factor can be found; the virus becomes activated without any apparent reason.

Like most other viruses, herpes simplex virus is contagious to people who have never had the infection before. Anyone who's had a fever blister or cold sore on the face is resistant to type 1 virus. Herpes simplex type 1 virus is not very contagious. Close contact such as kissing is necessary to transmit the infection.

Genital herpes (type 2) is usually spread through sexual intercourse and is usually a disease of adults. It's also contagious when in the active stages. Recurring herpes is not a re-infection, but activation of virus present in a quiet form in nerve tissue.

Treatment:

Herpes simplex heals by itself in about 10 days. The amount of time depends on the size of the blisters and their location. Your physician may discuss compresses, application of topical antibiotics or use of acyclovir with you.

This is the medical opinion of Savannah River Dermatology. For additional information, please contact our office at 706-691-7079.