

Managing fever blisters in the pharmacy

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Introduction

Fever blisters, also known as cold sores or *herpes labialis*, are small, painful, fluid filled, and appear in groups on the lips and around the mouth. They form into scabs over a few days, and usually heal any time between several days and two weeks. Fever blisters are caused by a virus which is not completely eliminated by the body's defenses. Thus, they often recur.

Causes

Fever blisters are caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). There are two types of HSV virus, i.e. HSV-1 and HSV-2. HSV-1 usually causes infection in or around the mouth, whereas HSV-2 is generally associated with genital herpes. However, both virus types can affect the mouth or genitals, and can be spread by oral sex.

HSV usually enters the body through a break in the skin around or inside the mouth. It can be spread by touching a fever blister or the infected fluid therefrom. This can occur from sharing eating utensils or razors, kissing an infected person, or touching that person's saliva.

Fever blister sores can also be triggered by sunlight, wind and fever, and infections such as colds and flu, as well as physical and emotional stress. This is because once an individual has had a cold sore, the virus remains dormant in the body, and the condition can recur when the body is placed under stress. Some people experience repeated fever blister attacks.

Symptoms

Fever blisters usually occur on the lips or face, and are very painful. Patients with lesions inside the mouth or affecting the eye require medical referral.

Discomfort, tingling or irritation may be felt on the skin for 6–24 hours before the appearance of a fever blister. Minute blisters then develop on red, inflamed skin. Roughly four days after their initial appearance, the blisters break down to produce a raw area with crusting and oozing. The lesions usually heal approximately a week later.

Management

Fever blisters are self-limiting and usually clear up within two weeks without treatment. However, they can be effectively treated with topical antiviral cream, such as aciclovir and penciclovir, which reduce the healing time and pain caused by the lesion.

Available over-the-counter for this purpose are:

- *Aciclovir*: Aciclovir is applied several times a day for 5–10 days, and is suitable for both adults and children.
- *Penciclovir*: Penciclovir is applied several times a day for four days, and is registered in South Africa for use in adults aged ≥ 18 years.

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Treatment with these agents is best commenced as soon as the symptoms are felt, and before the lesions appear. It is important for patients who suffer repeated attacks of fever blisters to be aware of this, and to initiate treatment promptly. Skin protectants, such as petrolatum, help to keep the skin moist and prevent cracking.

Oral analgesics, such as ibuprofen and paracetamol, can be used to relieve the pain caused by fever blisters. This medication may be used by adults and children in age-appropriate doses and formulations.

Any preparation used for the treatment of fever blisters should be used strictly according to the manufacturer's instructions, with due regard for pregnancy and interactions with other medication which the patient is taking.

Prevention

HSV is contagious and easily spread by direct contact. Patients are advised to wash their hands after applying a cream or ointment to the lesions, and should be made aware that it is not wise to share cutlery, towels, toothbrushes or face cloths until the condition has cleared up. Having oral sex with someone with fever blisters can cause genital herpes, and should be avoided until the lesion has healed.

It can be helpful to apply sunscreen to and around the lips when patients are subjected to increased sunlight. Patients with atopic eczema are susceptible to HSV infection, and should avoid contact with infected persons until the condition has healed.

The amino acid L-lysine was found to be beneficial in preventing cold sores.

Foods that are high in L-lysine include high protein foods like nuts, red meat, eggs, milk, cheese, beans, and sardines. However, some people may need more than just the usual dietary food to supply their needs for lysine, such as athletes, vegetarians, and vegans. These people can get additional sources of L-lysine from nutritional supplements in the form of liquids, tablets, or capsules which are available in health stores or pharmacies.

The patient should be referred to the doctor if:

- The fever blisters occur inside the mouth or affect the eyes
- The patient is immunocompromised

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- The cold sores don't heal within two weeks
- The symptoms are severe
- There are frequent cold sore recurrences.

Conclusion

Fever blisters are usually self-limiting. They can be treated effectively by initiating treatment with topical antiviral agents, such as aciclovir, as soon as the symptoms are felt. The spread of cold sores can be limited by observing appropriate preventative measures. The patient should be referred to the doctor if the symptoms are severe, or if the condition does not improve after appropriate treatment.

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