

TCM: Devil's itch

Whenever a red patch appears on a tingly and itchy lip, you can expect an outbreak of cold sores before too long. There is no absolute cure, but you can reduce their frequency or reduce the severity of an attack.

Cold sores usually appear on the lips, but they can also form on the nostrils, chin, fingers, eyes and even the roof of the mouth. Typically, one to two days before an outbreak you will notice a tingling sensation at the site. A cluster of blisters will form, then rupture resulting in ulceration. When the ulcer becomes dry, it will often itch and burn. Scabs can bleed and spread the infection, leading to a series of scabs, but the cold sore won't leave a scar. The course usually runs from seven to 10 days.

Cold sores are considered "heat sores", since they often appear during feverish diseases, according to TCM. It's claimed that cold sores appear because heat and wind pathogens accumulate in the lung and stomach meridians which are then brought to the surface, forming an unsightly skin lesion.

Treatment is based on the nature of the episodes as well as the distribution of the skin rash. For occasional episodes that are often seen on the lips or nostrils, physicians eliminate the wind and heat pathogens by using herbs such as magnolia flower, loquat leaf and gardenia fruit. Recurring cold sores are usually caused by improper diet, stress, menstruation, pregnancy and some illnesses. TCM aims to treat the internal triggering causes. For example: inadequate sleep means heart fire needs to be expelled; an emotional upset may mean liver heat needs to be dissipated; and fatigue may imply a *chi* deficiency which needs to be supplemented. Commonly used herbs in these cases include bamboo leaf and pseudostellaria root, dwarf lily turf tuber and anemarrhena rhizome.

Tropical applications are important during an outbreak. Many over-the-counter drugs are available to dry up the ulcer, ease pain and itching, or moisten the scab so that it is less likely to crack and bleed. You can make a compress yourself: use dry purslane herbs (30g) to prepare a cool infusion, soak cotton wool in it and then apply it to the sores for 20 minutes, two to three times daily. Some foods are beneficial in getting rid of toxic heat, such as mung beans, winter melons, cucumbers watermelons, loofahs, lotus roots, water chestnuts and celery.

Cold sores are contagious, so wash your hands regularly, don't pick or squeeze the sores, and avoid close contact with infants and those who have eczema or other immunity problems.

For vulnerable individuals and to prevent another outbreak, try a herbal tea consisting of gromwell root (12g), isatis root (30g), forsythia capsule (30g) and coix seed (30g). Drink twice a week.

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