

Preventing cold sores: do antivirals work?

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THE PROBLEM: Herpes simplex labialis (HSL) or, as it is more commonly known, a ‘cold sore’, is caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). Once someone has been infected with HSV, the virus will lie dormant. Between 20 and 40% of the population will have recurrent HSL episodes over time.¹ Recurrences of HSL seem to be precipitated by factors such as illness and stress.¹ There is no known way of eradicating HSV, but the most common treatments proposed to prevent recurrence of HSL are antiviral therapies.²

CLINICAL BOTTOM LINE: At this stage, the evidence does not support the use of short-term oral antivirals to reduce the recurrence of HSL.³ There was some low quality evidence that long-term use of oral antivirals may reduce the recurrence of HSL, but the clinical significance of the difference was small. Trials of topical antivirals again did not show any evidence to support their use.³

Preventive use of oral or topical antivirals

	Success	Evidence	Harms
Incidence of HSL during short-term preventive use of oral antivirals	No evidence was shown for taking either 800 mg twice daily or 200 mg five times daily, but there was a slight reduction in the incidence rate in people taking 400 mg twice daily	This was based on low-quality evidence gathered from only four small studies	There was no reported significant difference in the rate of adverse events in the antiviral arms in comparison to the placebo arms of the studies
Incidence of HSL during long-term preventive use of oral antivirals	There was some evidence that long-term use of aciclovir will reduce recurrence of HSL. However, the clinical benefit was small, as recurrence was reduced by only one episode over a four-month period.	This was based on low-quality evidence gathered from one study containing 125 participants in total	
Incidence of HSL during short-term preventive use of topical antivirals	There were no trials supporting the use of topical antivirals to reduce the incidence of HSL.	This was based on low-quality evidence	

References

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