



Pharmacy Self Care Health Facts Column

By John Bell - 28 August 2008

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Herpes infections – a not so friendly family affair

The website known as Facebook has become a raging success. In fact it's more than just a website. It's really a model for creating your own website where you can share its content and all kinds of information with family and friends – information such as contact details, likes and dislikes, photos and personal opinions.

It all sounds pretty attractive, and really quite exciting to be a member of a 50 million strong family worldwide. But there are potential problems and pitfalls.

Families are not always as friendly as we would like them to be. And so it is with the herpes family of viruses.

Herpes viruses are second only to cold and influenza viruses as a cause of human viral disease. There are at least 100 members of the family of which eight are known to infect humans.

The godfather of the family is probably the varicella zoster virus (VZV) which causes chickenpox and shingles. Most children who get chickenpox can cope with the symptoms, but complications (more common in adults) can occur and immunisation is recommended at 18 months of age. Shingles generally occurs in older adults when the dormant VZV is reactivated, sometimes decades after the original infection. And unless treatment is initiated within 72 hours of the first appearance of the rash, complications can be severe.

So it's essential that whenever shingles is suspected, we should get to the doctor 'quick-smart'.

Even more common than chickenpox and shingles are cold sores. They're not really a life and death issue; but for the cold sore sufferer, they're certainly more than just a minor irritation – especially if those cold sores recur and recur and recur.

Cold sores can become annoyingly itchy and painful; and particularly for adolescents, the emotional trauma can be significant. Most often it's the herpes simplex type 1 (HSV-1) virus which is the infecting organism; although the type 2 variety (usually implicated in genital herpes) can cause infections on the lips or in the mouth as well.

After the initial infection the virus, which is such a persistent little critter, lies dormant in the skin just waiting for our immune system to become stressed. Dry cracked lips, sunburn, general fatigue, even hormonal changes – for instance during menstruation – might be enough to trigger reactivation of the infection. If sunlight is a trigger factor, a sunscreen lip balm should be used regularly.

Most of us are carriers of HSV-1 and more than 10% of Australians are also infected with HSV-2; so we need to know all about both prevention and treatment strategies for cold sores, and be able to explain these to our customers.

Cold sores are transmitted from person to person by close contact (both HSV-1 and HSV-2 are spread by way of infected secretions on oral or genital mucosal surfaces.) The contact must involve mucous membranes or open or damaged skin.

Unconsciously we continually touch our lips more than elsewhere on our face, so this habit needs to be resisted. Particular care needs to be taken to avoid touching our eyes or contact lenses. Herpes infections in the eyes are very painful and difficult to treat.

Of course, sharing a kiss is out – even with your very best friend – as is sharing other items which may come in contact with the lesion; lipstick, lip moisturisers, topical cold sore remedies and drink containers.

Mild and occasional cases of cold sores can be treated with anaesthetic and analgesic ointments, creams and lotions. 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.

Right through September, pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information are conducting an awareness campaign on the prevention, early detection and treatment of cold sores. So if you want to maintain a good face look on your Facebook, and get some helpful hints from your local Self Care pharmacy.

Phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 for the nearest location.