Cold Sores

What is a cold sore?
Cold sores are small red blisters that appear on the lip and outer edge of the mouth. They often weep a clear liquid and scab over after a few days. Cold sores are often confused with impetigo. Impetigo is a bacterial infection of a cut or scratch, which often develops between the nose and upper lip and weeps a cloudy, honey-colored fluid. (see a health care provider for Impetigo).

What causes a cold sore?
Cold sores are caused by a herpes virus. Herpes viruses (chickenpox is an example of a herpes virus) stay in the body after the first infection. Something later will trigger the virus to become active again. Cold sores may appear after colds, fevers, sun exposure, stress, or during menstruation. Sometimes they develop for no apparent reason.

Prevention tips
- Avoid kissing a person who has a cold sore. Avoid direct skin contact with genital herpes sores or herpes sores elsewhere on the body.
- Use sunscreen on your lips and wear a hat if sun exposure tends to trigger cold sores.
- Reducing stress by practicing relaxation exercises may help.

Helpful hints
- Apply ice or a cool, wet towel to sore 3x’s a day to help reduce redness and swelling.
- Apply petroleum jelly to ease cracking and dryness.
- Use a lip protector (Blistex or Campho-Phenique) to ease pain. Don’t share the product with others.
- Apply vitamin E gel or a product with aloe vera, goldenseal, or bee propolis to the sore.
- Be patient. It takes 7 to 10 days for a cold sore to go away.