Herpes Simplex

What causes Herpes Simplex?
Herpes simplex, commonly called cold sores or fever blisters, may occur once or recur again and again. It's caused by the herpes hominis virus. There are two kinds of herpes virus: Type 1 and Type 2. Type 1 virus usually causes cold sores common on the lips and face. Herpes of the genital area is usually caused by Type 2 virus.

Herpes simplex begins as a group of small red bumps that blister. You may have noticed itching or discomfort before the rash appeared. The blisters begin to dry up after a few days and form yellow crusts. The crusts gradually fall off and leave slowly fading red areas. The whole process takes about 10 to 14 days. No scars form.

These mild symptoms are typical of recurring herpes simplex. The very first infection with Type 1 herpes simplex virus usually happens in childhood. It may go unrecognized, but often causes fever, general illness, and much local soreness. Once you have had a herpes simplex infection, the virus becomes permanently established in your nerve tissue. Recurring herpes results from activation of this virus. Between attacks, it lives quietly in nerve tissue. Studies show the vast majority of adults have been exposed to Type 1 herpes simplex.

Fever and sun exposure are the most common triggering factors for Type 1 herpes simplex virus. That's when cold sore or fever blisters break out. Often, the virus becomes activated without any apparent reason.

Contagion
Like most other viruses, herpes simplex virus is contagious to people who have never had the infection before. Anyone who's had a fever blister or cold sore on the face is resistant to Type 1 virus. Herpes simplex Type 1 virus is not very contagious. Close contact such as kissing is necessary to transmit the infection.

Genital herpes (Type 2) is usually spread through sexual intercourse and is essentially a disease of adults. It's highly contagious when in the active stages. Unfortunately, herpes simplex also may be contagious between attacks, when the skin is normal. Recurring herpes is not a re-infection but rather an activation of virus present in a quiet form in the nerve tissue. Studies show up to 20% of sexually active adults have been exposed to Type 2 herpes simplex.

Treatment
Acyclovir, the first medication effective against herpes simplex, became available in early 1985. To be effective, anti-virals must be taken by mouth. Acyclovir ointment (Zovirax ointment) does not work.

Anti-virals interfere with the growth of the virus, so it is important to start treatment early. If you can recognize the early signs of herpes (itching, burning, and redness) before blisters develop - that is the best time to start taking acyclovir.

The purpose of anti-virals is to stop the spread of the virus. It does not speed the healing of blister and scabs already there. For recurring herpes simplex, anti-virals are usually given for 3 or 4 days. For the first attack of herpes simplex (primary herpes), anti-virals are continued for 7 or 8 days. Side effects from anti-virals are rare. If you are pregnant, anti-virals (like other medicines) should be taken only if approved by the clinician responsible for your prenatal care.

Anti-virals are not miracle drugs that banish herpes simplex. If you begin treatment early, it will shorten the course of your disease. Once blisters and crusts have formed, time is required for their healing. Two simple remedies will make you more comfortable while you are getting over herpes:

1. If there is oozing and crusting, apply cool tap water with a clean cloth for 10 to 15 minutes two to three times a day.
2. Later, when the blisters become yellow and crusted, you can relieve any cracking and dryness with small amounts of plain white petrolatum (Vaseline).
Recurring herpes is usually only an uncomfortable nuisance. One exception is herpes of the eye. Because it may lead to eye damage, you should see an eye doctor (ophthalmologist) immediately. Fortunately, eye involvement is rare with herpes simplex. Herpes simplex around the eye is not dangerous unless it involves the eye.

If your need is urgent, and the student health service is closed, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call 911 for an ambulance.

Prevention
At present, there are only two ways to prevent recurring herpes simplex: (1) Continuous daily intake of anti-viral medication; and (2) protection from sunlight, if sun is a triggering factor. Taking anti-viral medication on a daily basis over many months may be of benefit if you are plagued with frequent and disabling attacks of herpes.

If sunlight activates your herpes simplex, use a sunscreen on and around your lips when you go outdoors. You can use a heavily pigmented lipstick or colorless sun screening lip pomade on your lips, and a sun block cream or lotion on the skin around your lips. Both the lip pomade and the sun block should have an SPF (sun protection factor) of at least 15, preferably over 25.

Summary
Fever blisters or cold sores are harmless infections caused by the herpes hominis virus. Anti-viral medication taken by mouth, will stop the spread of herpes and make attacks less severe if started early in each attack. Fortunately, herpes heals without leaving scars. Sometimes, repeated attacks can be prevented if a triggering factor, such as sunlight, can be found and avoided. Herpes simplex is moderately contagious to people who have never had the infection.