

Finger Infection: Viral (Herpetic Whitlow)

What is a viral finger infection?

Infection of one or more fingers with a virus can cause an infection called herpetic whitlow.

What is the cause?

The viruses that also cause cold sores and genital ulcers are usually the cause of a viral finger infection. The viruses are called herpes simplex 1 or 2. They can infect your finger if there is a break in the skin, like a torn cuticle. It's also possible for a finger to get infected if you put your finger in your mouth when it is infected with the herpes simplex 1 virus (the usual cause of cold sores, or fever blisters).

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include:

- 1 or more blisters in a cluster on the fingertips
- Redness
- Painful and swollen fingers

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your medical history and symptoms. Your provider will examine you. You may also have blood tests or a swab of the fluid from the sore to see if the infection is caused by a virus or by bacteria.

How is it treated?

The infection usually gets better without special treatment.

Your healthcare provider may prescribe antiviral medicine. One form of the medicine is put on the skin. You may also need to take antiviral medicine by mouth to keep the blisters from coming back.

The infection should get better in 2 to 4 weeks. However, the virus stays in the body and so the infection could come back. Usually repeat infections are milder and heal more quickly.

How can I take care of myself?

Follow your healthcare provider's instructions.

You can take acetaminophen or ibuprofen for pain. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicines (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, may cause stomach bleeding and other problems. These risks increase with age. Read the label and take as directed. Unless recommended by your healthcare provider, do not take for more than 10 days for any reason.

The fluid in the blisters is infectious. Cover the blisters with a bandage. You can also cover the bandage with clothing (such as gloves or socks) to protect others at work or to keep from spreading the virus to other parts of your body as you sleep.

Ask your provider:

- How and when you will hear your test results
- How long it will take to recover
- What activities you should avoid and when you can return to your normal activities
- How to take care of yourself at home
- What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them

Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup.

How can I help prevent a viral finger infection?

The virus is usually spread from other parts of the body. The best way to prevent the infection is to avoid biting the nails or sucking the fingers, especially when there's a cold sore present.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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