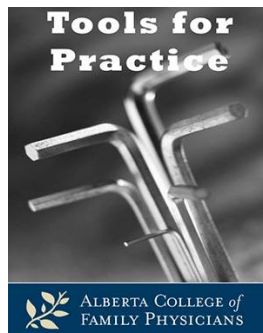


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Reviewed: March 10, 2017
Evidence Updated: 3 RCTs added, limitations and context changed
Bottom Line: Unchanged
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Simplicity for Simplex (Cold Sores): A pill in the pocket takes the tingling away

Clinical Question: Do antivirals (oral or topical) or docosanol (Abreva®) improve healing time for patients with recurrent herpes labialis (cold sores)?

Bottom-line: One or two doses of famciclovir may improve cold sore healing by ~2 days, while valacyclovir and longer courses of topical acyclovir or docosanol (Abreva) may improve healing by ~0.5–1 day. Non-industry funded primary care trials directly comparing different therapies are needed.

Evidence:

- Placebo controlled randomized controlled trials (RCTs) of: Commercially available products in Canada.
 - Immunocompetent patients with recurrent cold sores (most ≥ 3 episodes/year).
 - Starting treatment ≤ 1 hour of prodrome symptoms (unless specified).
 - Cold sores not artificially induced with UV radiation.
- Oral anti-virals:
 - Three larger RCTs:
 - Famciclovir: 1500 mg x1 or 750mg BID x1 day (477 patients).¹
 - Valacyclovir: 1 day: 2 gram bid or 2 day: 2 gram BID then 1 gram bid (1,856 patients).²
 - Acyclovir: 400 mg 5 times/day x5 days (174 patients).³
 - Healing time improvement: (definitions vary)
 - Famciclovir: 2-2.5 days.
 - Valacyclovir: 0.5 ~1 day.
 - Acyclovir: Not significant.
- Topical Acyclovir:
 - Acyclovir 5% cream 5x/day x 4 days (1,341 patients).⁴
 - Healing time improved ~0.5 day.
- Topical Acyclovir + Corticosteroid (Xerese®):⁵
 - acyclovir 5% +/- hydrocortisone 1% cream 5Xs /day x 5 days (1,443 patients).

- Healing time improved ~0.5 days, no additional benefit with steroids.
- Docosanol 10% (Abreva®):
 - 5x/day started <12 hours of symptoms until healing occurred (743 patients):⁶
 - Healing time improved ~0.75 days.
- Limitations:
 - No direct comparisons of different oral agents.
 - Studies are industry supported, many have same author.¹⁻⁵
- Systematic Reviews of questionable quality (missing studies,⁷ inappropriate pooling⁸) conclude:
 - Anti-virals: Oral agents have faster healing times than topical.⁷
 - Similar healing times when add steroids to topical acyclovir.⁸

Context:

- Antivirals generally help cold sores heal in 4-5 days versus 5-6 days.¹⁻⁵
- 35% of patients experience >4 recurrences annually.⁹
- Cost estimates (for Alberta):
 - Oral anti-virals: \$20 (valacyclovir x 1 day) to \$48 (acyclovir x 5 days).
 - Topicals (per tube): Docosanol \$20, Xerese \$52, acyclovir \$88.
- Health Canada has approved valacyclovir for treating cold sores,¹⁰ while FDA approved valacyclovir,¹¹ famciclovir,¹² and acyclovir (oral and topical).^{13,14}

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Tools for Practice is a biweekly article summarizing medical evidence with a focus on topical issues and practice modifying information. It is coordinated by G. Michael Allan, MD, CCFP and the content is written by practising family physicians who are joined occasionally by a health professional from another medical specialty or health discipline. Each article is peer-reviewed, ensuring it maintains a high standard of quality, accuracy, and academic integrity. If you are not a member of the ACFP and would like to receive the TFP emails, please sign up for the distribution list at <http://bit.ly/signupfortfps>. Archived articles are available on the ACFP website.

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