

Common mouth sores

Anyone who has had a mouth sore knows it can be painful and can interfere with eating. Mouth sores may be caused by bacterial, viral or fungal infections. Loose orthodontic wires, dentures that no longer fit, or a sharp edge from a broken tooth or filling also can cause them. And mouth sores may be a symptom of a disease or disorder. The most common are canker sores, cold sores, candidiasis and leukoplakia.

CANKER SORES

Canker sores are very common, but they are not contagious. They are small white or gray ulcers with a red border. They often are confused with cold sores; however, while cold sores usually occur outside the mouth, canker sores occur inside the mouth.

The exact cause of canker sores is uncertain, but some experts believe that immune system problems or bacteria or viruses may be involved. Fatigue, stress or allergies can increase the likelihood of canker sores.

Canker sores usually heal in a week or two, but recurrent outbreaks are common. If you have a canker sore, you should avoid hot, spicy or acidic food. Over-the-counter topical anesthetics may provide temporary relief. Rinsing with antimicrobial mouth rinses may help reduce irritation.

COLD SORES

Cold sores, which also are called fever blisters or herpes simplex, are groups of painful, fluid-filled blisters that often erupt around the lips and sometimes under the nose or around the chin. They usually are caused by herpes virus type I and are very contagious.

Once a person has a primary herpes infection, which often occurs before adulthood, the virus stays in the body and may cause recurrent attacks, which are characterized by tiny blisters that appear on the edge of the lips. Blisters sometimes appear after a fever, a sunburn, skin abrasions or emotional upset.

Cold sores usually heal in about a week. Over-the-counter topical anesthetics may provide tem-

porary relief. In some cases, antiviral drugs may be prescribed.

CANDIDIASIS

Candidiasis is a fungal infection that results in red-and-cream-colored patches that form on the mouth's moist surfaces. Tissues under the patch can be painful. The condition may cause difficulty in swallowing and diminish the sense of taste.

Candidiasis most often occurs in people who are very young, elderly or debilitated by disease or who have an improperly functioning immune system. It may result from antibiotic treatment, which decreases the normal bacteria in the mouth.

Treatment consists of controlling the conditions that caused the outbreak. Because candidiasis is common among denture-wearers, a thorough daily cleaning of dentures is important. Removing dentures at night also allows the denture-bearing tissues to regenerate.

If antibiotics are the culprit, talk to your doctor about reducing your dosage or changing the treatment. Saliva substitutes or prescription medications can help. Antifungal medications may be used when the underlying cause is unavoidable or incurable. Good oral hygiene is essential.

LEUKOPLAKIA

Leukoplakia is a thick white patch that forms on the gums, tongue or inside of the cheeks and is caused by excess cell growth. It is common among tobacco users. It also can result from denture irritation or chewing the inside of the cheek. The danger of leukoplakia is that it can become cancerous.

Treatment involves identifying the factors that may cause the lesions. For some, this means ceasing tobacco use. For others, it means replacing dentures and bridges that no longer fit properly. The dentist will examine the lesion at three- to six-month intervals depending on its type, location and size.

The dentist should examine any mouth sore that persists for a week or more. ■

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