

The following resources related to this article are available online at jada.ada.org (this information is current as of November 21, 2012):

Updated information and services including high-resolution figures, can be found in the online version of this article at:

<http://jada.ada.org/content/143/11/1270>

Information about obtaining **reprints** of this article or about permission to reproduce this article in whole or in part can be found at: <http://www.ada.org/990.aspx>

Common oral sores and irritations

Your oral health is not limited to your teeth. Sores or irritations can develop in and around the mouth. Fortunately, they usually heal on their own within a week or two.

Although several types of soft-tissue disturbances can affect your mouth, we will address four common ones: canker sores, cold sores, leukoplakia and oral candidiasis.

CANKER SORES

Canker sores develop inside the mouth as small white or gray sores that have a red border. They are not contagious. They may occur as one sore or several. In some cases, the cause is unknown, but trauma to oral soft tissues is a common cause of canker sores. Canker sores usually heal on their own after one or two weeks. They are painful; over-the-counter topical anesthetics and antimicrobial mouthrinses may provide temporary relief. Spicy, salty or acidic foods, such as citrus fruits or juices, can irritate the sore.

COLD SORES

Cold sores (also called “fever blisters”) appear as clusters of red, raised blisters outside the mouth, typically around the lips, although they can develop under the nose or around the chin. The blisters are filled with fluid and can break open, allowing the fluid to leak out. They then can scab over until they heal. Cold sores are caused by the herpes simplex virus and are highly contagious. The initial infection with the herpesvirus can be accompanied by cold or flu-like symptoms and can cause painful oral lesions. There is no cure for the herpesvirus; once you are infected, the virus stays in the body and causes occasional flare-ups associated with the cold sores. Cold sore blisters usually heal by themselves in about one week. Over-the-counter topical anesthetics can provide some pain relief. Your dentist may prescribe antiviral drugs to reduce the healing time for these sores.

LEUKOPLAKIA

Leukoplakia is an overgrowth of cells that results in a rough patch of whitish tissue. It can develop anywhere in your mouth. These patches typically are not painful and are not contagious. They can result from irritations such as ill-fitting dentures or the habit of chewing on the

inside of the cheek. Leukoplakia also occurs among tobacco users. Treatment begins with identifying the source of the irritation. Once the irritant is removed—which may mean giving up tobacco—the patches should disappear. Sometimes, leukoplakia is associated with oral cancer, so it’s important to see your dentist if you notice any of these patches developing. Your dentist may recommend a biopsy if the patch appears suspicious.

CANDIDIASIS

Candidiasis (also called “oral thrush”) is a yeast infection that develops on the soft, moist tissues inside your mouth. It appears as a smooth, white patch with a red base, which can be sore or can bleed. Candidiasis is caused by a fungus and typically develops when the immune system is weakened. People who are in poor health, the very old or very young, and people with systemic diseases such as diabetes are at risk of developing oral candidiasis. Some medications, such as steroids or cancer therapies, may increase the risk of developing this infection. Antibiotics also increase the risk of developing infection because they can alter the normal balance of 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 one’s dentures is important. Removing dentures at night also allows the denture-bearing tissues to regenerate.

Talk with your dentist if you develop candidiasis. He or she can counsel you on ways to treat the condition, which may include use of anti-fungal medications.

Talk with your dentist if you develop any sore or irritation in or around your mouth that does not heal within a couple of weeks. He or she may want to examine the lesion more closely or prescribe a medication to treat the sore or to help you manage any discomfort caused by the sore or irritation. ■

Prepared by the American Dental Association (ADA) Division of Science. Copyright © 2012 American Dental Association. Unlike other portions of JADA, the print version of this page may be clipped and photocopied as a handout for patients without reprint permission from the ADA Publishing Division. Any other use, copying or distribution of this material, whether in printed or electronic form and including the copying and posting of this material on a Web site, is strictly prohibited without prior written consent of the ADA Publishing Division.

“For the Dental Patient” provides general information on dental treatments to dental patients. It is designed to prompt discussion between dentist and patient about treatment options and does not substitute for the dentist’s professional assessment based on the individual patient’s needs and desires.