

What to Do about Common Mouth Sores and Patches



Mouth sores and patches are warning signs to let you know you have a problem in your mouth.

► Mouth sores can be caused by an irritation of some kind, such as orthodontic wires, ill-fitting dentures, or the sharp edge on a filling or broken tooth. However, you might also be experiencing a canker sore or a cold sore. Mouth sores, in particular, can hurt and can make it difficult for you to eat. They can be caused by infections that are bacterial, fungal, or viral. They can also be indicative of a bigger health problem that affects other parts of your body.

► Patches, like mouth sores, can be caused by an irritation, such as chewing the inside of your cheek, wearing dentures that don't fit, or smoking. But they can also be caused by a fungal infection called candidiasis or some other cause. Some patches, such as those caused by one condition called leukoplakias, won't hurt but could begin growing cancerous cells.

No matter what kind of patch or sore you are experiencing, you can probably give it a couple of weeks to clear up before going to see your dentist about it. Eat healthy food and drink plenty of water while you are waiting so that it will be easier for your body to heal. If the problem hasn't been resolved after a couple of weeks, however, then it is particularly important to get the problem checked out professionally.

Here's what else you should know about some of the most common mouth sores or patches you might see, along with advice about what to do.

Canker Sores

Nobody is sure what causes canker sores, which are small white ulcers with red edges that are always located inside the mouth. There are two kinds: simple canker sores, which generally afflict people between the ages of ten and 20, and complex ones that are less common but are usually experienced by people who have had canker sores before. As you would expect, all canker sores hurt. They can also make it difficult for you to eat or talk. Some experts think they might be caused by some sort of problem in the immune system. Whatever the cause, however, you are more likely to get one if you are tired, stressed, or suffer from allergies. You are also more likely to get canker sores if you've had to deal with a previous outbreak.

The most important things to know are that canker sores are not contagious, and that they usually clear up on their own after a couple of weeks. You can get temporary relief from the pain of a canker sore by using over-the-counter topical medicines. It's an open wound, so of course you'll want to avoid anything that makes it hurt more, like foods that are acidic, hot, or spicy. If the over-the-counter medications are inadequate or ineffective for you, or if your canker sores just don't go away, your doctor may be able to prescribe specific drugs that will help you heal.

Cold Sores

Cold sores, or fever blisters, are caused by herpes simplex virus (HSV) type 1 and 2. If you have cold sores, you will see small blisters that hurt, are filled with fluid, and sometimes break. You may also have a fever, a sore throat, and swelling in your glands. Cold sores are usually found around your lips. Sometimes people get cold sores under the nose or in the chin area. Sometimes the blisters can even occur inside the mouth. Most people catch the infection before they become adults. Once you've had a primary herpes infection, unfortunately, the virus stays in your body and can be the source of recurring attacks.

It is important for someone with cold sores to understand that they are highly contagious. If you have a break in your skin, either around the mouth or inside the mouth, that's where the virus can enter the body. The disease can be spread if you touch a cold sore or touch infected fluid, such as saliva, that has come in contact with a cold sore. If someone has been infected, it is especially important not to kiss them, share food or razors with them, or touch that person's saliva. Cold sores will usually heal within a couple of weeks. Prescription and over-the-counter medications can both be used to alleviate the pain from the cold sores. For severe cases, a doctor can prescribe an antiviral drug.

Candidiasis

Candidiasis is a fungal infection that is in the mouth and that causes sometimes-painful red-and-cream patches. It is also called a yeast infection, or thrush. The patches can make it hard for you to swallow, and they can also affect your taste buds, which causes food to taste different than it usually does. People have known about this kind of problem since at least the time of Hippocrates, who lived approximately 460 to 370 B.C.

Candidiasis is a disease that is considered to be opportunistic. Most of the time, candidiasis can affect people who:

- ▶ Are extremely old or extremely young.
- ▶ Are run down by other diseases.
- ▶ Have a damaged immune system that is not working correctly.
- ▶ Are taking or have recently finished a course of antibiotics.
- ▶ Wear dentures.
- ▶ Have dry mouth.

Good oral hygiene is important when you are trying to clear up a case of candidiasis. For those who wear dentures, cleaning the dentures thoroughly every day and leaving them out at night can promote healing, giving the gum tissue time to heal. If the infection was caused by antibiotics and you are still taking them, talk to your doctor about either changing the prescription or reducing the size of the dose. You can get saliva substitutes if that's the source of the problem. Also, your doctor may be able to prescribe fungal medications that will help manage or cure the problem.

White Patches

If you have white patches in the mouth, they may have been caused by:

- ▶ Some kind of trauma, such as chewing the inside of your cheek
- ▶ Irritation from braces or dentures.
- ▶ Inflammatory bowel disease, alcoholism, or cancer.
- ▶ Chemotherapy or specific drugs.
- ▶ Smoking.

In general, you can get the white patches to go away if you can get rid of the underlying source of the problem.

In addition, though, white patches also occur for no good reason that you can figure out. One particular

kind of lesion, which is connected to tobacco use, is called a leukoplakias. It is a precancerous condition, but it is hard to tell the difference between this kind of patch and the kind you can get from trauma to the tissue inside the mouth. Leukoplakias doesn't hurt, but the patches can develop cancerous cells. The most serious kind usually occurs around the tongue or the tonsils.

Other medical conditions can also cause white patches. Since it may not be obvious what the problem is, your dentist will want to biopsy anything that lasts longer than a couple of weeks. The biopsy will tell the dentist whether your white patch is benign, precancerous, or cancerous. Despite the diagnosis, your doctor will want to evaluate the patch again periodically to make sure that the diagnosis is still a valid one.

