

Canker Sores

Canker sores are extremely painful ulcers that develop in the mouth. They develop on oral soft tissues, such as the tongue, cheek, or at the base of the gums. Canker sores are unlike cold sores in that they don't occur on the outer surface of your lips and they aren't contagious. Anyone that has had one will attest that they make speaking, eating, and brushing teeth painful and difficult.

THE REASON WHY PEOPLE get canker sores is unclear. Today, researchers feel that there may be multiple factors that can lead to outbreaks. The most common event leading to a canker sore is thought to be from a minor oral injury. This can include dental work, overly aggressive brushing, sharp, spicy, or acidic foods, or a cheek bite. Other factors that may lead to a canker sore include food allergies and sensitivities, vitamin B-12, zinc, folic acid, and iron deficiencies, intestinal diseases such as Celiac disease and Inflammatory Bowel Disease, and stress. Lastly, there is emerging evidence that sodium lauryl sulfate, a specific component of some toothpastes and mouth rinses, can lead to canker sores. Sodium lauryl sulfate is found in many industrial and residential cleaning products. It is a chemical that gives the cleaning property to a detergent and it increases the thickening and foaming ability of the toothpaste.

Treatment for an average canker sore is typically not necessary, as they tend to heal on their own in one to two weeks. Over-the-counter numbing pastes such as Orabase can help relieve the symp-

tom of the sore. Larger, persistent, or extremely painful sores may require medical care. A number of treatment options exist including mouth rinses, ointments, and systemic steroids. Lastly, taking nutritional supplements such as folic acid, vitamin B-6, vitamin B-12, and zinc may not only shorten healing time, but also prevent new canker sores from emerging.

The prevention of canker sores can be as simple as watching what you eat and minimizing trauma. Avoid foods that are known to be allergic and that irritate your mouth. Typical examples include nuts, chips, pretzels, certain spices, salty food, and acidic fruits. Also, choose a healthy diet with plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains to prevent nutritional deficiencies. Choose a soft tooth brush and be careful brushing around your mouth. If you have any sharp dental structures or appliances, like braces, either have your dentist smooth them or use guards and waxes to cover the sharp edges. Choose mouth rinses and toothpastes that do not contain sodium lauryl sulfate.

Most canker sores are readily identifiable, are



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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not contagious, and heal spontaneously in seven to 14 days. If you have a canker sore that is extremely painful which limits daily function, is recurrent, or fails to heal on its own, then you should make an appointment with your dentist for diagnosis and treatment. U

Your dentist can make the diagnosis of a canker sore based on the history, location, and appearance of the sore.

Typical information your dentist may ask you to aid in diagnosis include:

- What are and when did you first notice your symptoms?
- Have you had similar sores in the past?
- Have you had any recent dental work?
- Have you recently experienced significant stress or major life changes?
- What is your typical daily diet and what medications are you taking?