



Canker (mouth) sores

What are canker sores?

Canker sores also known as aphthous ulcers or mouth sores are ulcers that are usually off white in colour in the middle with red edges found on the tongue and inside lining of the cheeks and lips. They are usually quite painful and last anywhere from 5 to 10 days.



Causes of canker sores

- Stress
- Allergies
- Nutritional deficiencies such as Vits B₁, B₆, B₁₂, zinc or iron
- Eating certain acidic foods – strawberries, citrus fruits, tomatoes

Types of canker sores

1. **Minor aphthae** – these are usually small ulcers (less than 1cm in diameter) and appear as single or multiple ulcers (1 to 5) on the underside of the tongue, floor of mouth or inside lining of the cheek. They heal spontaneously within 7 to 10 days.
2. **Major aphthae** – these ulcers are less common and present more severely compared to minor aphthae. They present as small clusters of ulcers, slightly larger on diameter compared to minor aphthae. They occur in larger numbers (1 to 10) and can be found on lips, soft palate and throat. They can be present for weeks to months causing severe discomfort and pain during swallowing.
3. **Herpetiform** – these are the least common and appear as small clusters 2-3mm in diameter and 10-100 in number. They last for around 7 to 30 days and can cause scarring.

Note: It is important to consult your health care professional if you have any symptoms pointing towards major or herpetiform aphthae.

Can canker sores be spread from person to person?

Since canker sores are not caused by a bacteria or virus, they cannot be spread from one person to another.

How to prevent canker sores

- Since stress is one of the causes of canker sores, relaxation and stress reduction can significantly reduce occurrence
- Detecting nutritional deficiencies and replenishing them with diet or supplements
- Avoiding acidic foods if that is identified as one of the potential causes of canker sores
- Avoid harsh toothpastes containing sodium lauryl sulfate

How to treat canker sores

Minor apthae usually self-resolve within 7 to 10 days however, some products can be used to provide temporary relief of pain.

1. **Topical anesthetics** like benzocaine or lidocaine (Orajel, Zilactin B) can be applied to the ulcer using a Q-tip 4 times a day before meals and at bedtime for up to 1 week. These products only provide short-term relief lasting for around 30 mins.
2. **Oral anesthetics** – Acetaminophen (Tylenol) is recommended for pain relief and should be dosed according to the dosing instructions on the label. In any case, the maximum recommended dose should not be exceeded. Anti-inflammatory pain relievers like Ibuprofen (Advil), Naproxen (Aleve) or Aspirin should be avoided since they may worsen the ulcers.
3. **Protectants** – using topical products with hydroxypropyl cellulose or carboxymethylcellulose (Orabase paste) can provide temporary pain relief by forming a barrier over the ulcer and preventing irritation.

Red flags – When to see your doctor

- You have major or herpetiform apthae
- You have canker sores that are recurring
- Your canker sore has gotten larger or more are developing
- Canker sores are present after 14 days
- You are experiencing significant pain or have trouble chewing or swallowing

Tips

- Maintain regular daily hygiene – Brush twice daily and floss teeth daily
- Canker sores can be cleansed by rinsing the mouth with salt and water (2.5 – 5mL salt in 250mL of warm water) several times a day especially after meals
- Don't use mouth washes that have high alcohol content while you have ulcers in your mouth since it could cause stinging
- Avoid salty, spicy, acidic and hard food since they could worsen the canker sore pain

Disclaimer: The information found in this brochure is not intended to replace the advice of your pharmacist or physician. If you have any questions specific to your health, please contact your healthcare provider.

References:

1. Mayo Clinic Staff. Diseases and conditions – canker sore. Mayo Clinic. <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/canker-sore/basics/symptoms/con-20021262>. Published March 19, 2015. Accessed January 18, 2016.
2. Cunha JP. Canker sores. MedicineNet. http://www.medicinenet.com/canker_soers/page8.htm. Updated September 14, 2015. Accessed January 18, 2016.