

Canker Sores

► PROBLEM

Canker sores afflict 20 percent of Americans. They nestle between the folds of your inner cheeks and lips, on the base of your tongue, the floor of your mouth, or on your soft palate. Eat anything acidic, and they'll burn like fire. These painful critters, also called recurrent aphthous ulcers, are yellowish-gray or white with bright red borders. They're tiny, round, and pop up individually or in clusters. Fortunately, they're not contagious and usually heal within 7 to 14 days. But when they do crop up, they can make talking, eating, and even brushing your teeth a hair-raising experience.

► CAUSES

Stress, heredity, and certain foods such as chocolate, nuts, tomatoes, green peppers, strawberries, oranges, and other citrus fruits are top canker sore triggers. Sharp-edged corn chips and pretzels are just as guilty. They can irritate and injure your mouth's lining and produce an ulcer, says Terry D. Rees, D.D.S., chairman of the department of periodontics and director of the Stomatology Center at Baylor College of Dentistry in Dallas. Studies show that vitamin and mineral deficiencies in B₆, B₁₂, folate, iron, and zinc are linked to the nasty sores. In rare cases inflammatory bowel disorders such as colitis, celiac, and Crohn's disease are the culprits.

► HOW SERIOUS

In general, canker sores aren't serious, except for the discomfort. But if they recur more than once a month, show up in bunches, appear very large, or last longer than 14 days, see your doctor, says Sol Silverman, D.D.S., professor of

DO THIS NOW

Place one teaspoon of table salt in four ounces of warm water. Swish the solution in your mouth for 20 to 30 seconds and then spit it out. Salt water will keep your mouth clean and helps soothe the pain, says Terry D. Rees, D.D.S., chairman of the department of periodontics and director of the Stomatology Center at Baylor College of Dentistry in Dallas.

oral medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. He can determine whether you really have canker sores or something more serious. "If your sore isn't painful, looks like a white or red and white patch or a lump, and it doesn't seem to heal, it may be the first sign of mouth cancer," says Dr. Silverman.

► SOLUTIONS

Gargle with antacids. Grab some Mylanta, Maalox, or milk of magnesia from your medicine cabinet. Chew the tablet or, if you have the liquid form, shake the bottle, take a swig, and swish it around in your mouth. Just don't

swallow it. "The thick, milky solution coats the canker sore and helps protect it from irritation and abrasion," says Ara DerMarderosian, Ph.D., professor of pharmacognosy and medicinal chemistry at Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science.

Numb the pain. If your canker sore is full-blown, dab on a topical anesthetic gel or cream designed for oral use containing benzocaine. Zilactin-B and Orajel are good choices to buy at a drugstore. Use the anesthetic before meals and more often, if necessary, for comfort. But you probably should not apply it more than three or four times a day. "They won't make your canker sore go away any faster, but they'll quell the pain instantly," Dr. Rees says.

Go for vitamin E. Instead of swallowing the gelcap, crack it open and rub the oil on the ulcer, says Craig Zunka, D.D.S., past president of the Holistic Dental Association in Front Royal, Virginia. You can use plain vitamin E liquid for convenience. Four times a day, just saturate a cotton ball and dab it on the sore. "This will cut healing time by 40 percent," says Dr. Zunka.

► ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

Wash it away. Wash out your mouth with goldenseal. Prepare a tea to be used as a mouthwash by using two teaspoons of the herb (available at health food stores) and one cup of water. Rinse with the tea three or four times a day. The mouthwash will ease the pain and speed healing, says Varro E. Tyler, Ph.D., distinguished professor emeritus of pharmacognosy and dean emeritus of Purdue University School of Pharmacy and Pharmacal Sciences in West Lafayette, Indiana.

MEN'S HEALTH INDEX

The following is a list of the top eight foods that trigger canker sores (listed in no particular order), according to Terry D. Rees, D.D.S., chairman of the department of periodontics and director of the Stomatology Center at Baylor College of Dentistry in Dallas.

1. Tomatoes
3. Strawberries
4. Pineapple
5. Lemons
6. Chocolate
7. Peanuts
8. Sharp, hard foods like potato chips

Soothe it with calendula. Calendula as a tincture—a solution of the herb steeped in drinkable alcohol or a similar substance—is sold at some health food stores. Buy the water-based or glycerin-based variety; the alcohol-based tincture will sting, says Dr. Zunka. The water-based tincture is available through Washington Homeopathic Pharmacy, 124 Fairfax Street, Berkeley Springs, WV 25411. Smear the liquid right on the canker sore or dilute it with water to use as a mouth rinse. To dilute, use 25 drops of calendula and four ounces of water. “Within 30 seconds, your pain will subside and healing will begin,” says Dr. Zunka.

► PREVENTIVE MEASURES

Say so long to SLS. Studies suggest that the foaming agent sodium lauryl sulfate (SLS), found in toothpastes, may cause canker sores. Study participants who brushed with an SLS-free paste for three months reduced canker sore outbreaks by 70 percent. So find a paste without SLS, recommends Dr. Rees. You can start with Biotene, available at drugstores.

Try triclosan. Switch to a toothpaste containing triclosan, an analgesic and anti-inflammatory agent that may reduce canker sore recurrences, says Dr. Rees. Colgate Total is one product to try.

Police your food. Keep a food diary to determine which foods trigger the sores. That way you’ll know what to avoid. If you get canker sores often, cut down on citrus fruits, sweets, and sharp-edged salty snacks to see how you do, suggests Dr. Rees.

Load up on vitamin C. Take 500 to 1,000 milligrams of vitamin C with bioflavonoids twice a day in pill form for five to seven days, says Dr. Zunka. “You’ll notice that your canker sore recurrences will drop dramatically,” Dr. Zunka says. “If this doesn’t work, up the dosage. But don’t exceed 3,000 milligrams in a day. Megadoses of vitamin C can cause diarrhea in some people,” Dr. Zunka adds. In fact, taking more than 1,200 milligrams of vitamin C daily may be enough to cause diarrhea in some people.

Pop some lysine. Lysine is an amino acid supplement that works wonders for some guys. Take a 500-milligram tablet one to three times a day to prevent the canker sores, says Dr. Zunka. “Some people just need to take the lysine when they begin to get a canker sore,” he says. If you’re one of those guys, taking lysine for five to seven days should help it clear up fast. If you get canker sores often, taking one or two tablets daily can stop them from starting, adds Dr. Zunka.