



Pharmaceutical
Society of Australia



Mouth Ulcers

(aphthous ulcers or canker sores)

Mouth ulcers are small, painful sores on the inside lining of the mouth. They usually develop on the inside of the lips and cheeks and on the underneath and edge of the tongue. Medicines from a pharmacist can reduce the pain and help mouth ulcers to heal.

Causes

In many cases the underlying cause of mouth ulcers is not known, but they may be associated with stress or tissue injury. Causes of mouth ulcers include:

- Biting or chewing the inside of the cheek
- Damage to the inside of the mouth from very hot food or drinks
- Damage to the inside of the mouth from some foods (e.g., caffeine, tangy cheese, chocolate, acidic, spicy or salty food)
- Brushing the teeth and gums too hard
- Some toothpastes and mouth rinses
- Poorly fitting dentures, braces, rough dental fillings or sharp edges on teeth
- Certain medicines, including herbal remedies – ask a pharmacist
- Some cancer treatments
- Some medical conditions (e.g., HIV/AIDS, inflammatory bowel disease, coeliac disease)
- A dry mouth (which may be due to medicines or medical conditions)
- Quitting smoking
- Some nutritional deficiencies (e.g., low iron, folic acid, zinc, B-group vitamins)
- Hormone changes (e.g., menstruation)
- Stress.

Although anyone can get a mouth ulcer, they tend to run in families and may be an inherited condition.



Signs and symptoms

Some people feel a tingling or burning on the inside of the lips or cheeks, 1-2 days before an ulcer appears.

Mouth ulcers are:

- Round or oval shaped, shallow sores, usually less than 1cm across
- Yellow to grey-white in colour with a raised red rim; there may be redness and swelling around them
- Usually very painful.

Most mouth ulcers heal in 7-14 days without scarring. They are not contagious.

Blisters or sores on the lips and around the outside of the mouth are usually cold sores, not mouth ulcers. A pharmacist or doctor can help you know the difference.

Medicines

Most mouth ulcers heal by themselves without treatment, but medicines can reduce the discomfort and help them to heal faster. There is a range of non-prescription products available for mouth ulcers. Ask a pharmacist for advice.

Pastes:

- Form a protective, soothing layer over the mouth ulcer
- Some pastes contain anti-inflammatory medicines to reduce pain and swelling. These medicines may speed healing, especially if applied as soon as the ulcer begins.

Mouthwashes and lozenges:

- Some products contain an antiseptic to stop bacteria in the mouth from infecting the ulcer
- Some products contain a medicine to reduce pain and swelling
- Are helpful for treating mouth ulcers that are in hard to reach places
- Help keep the mouth clean if it is too painful to brush teeth properly.

Gels and paints:

- Some products contain a medicine to reduce pain and swelling
- Some products contain a local anaesthetic (e.g., lignocaine, benzocaine) to numb the ulcer
- Some products contain an antiseptic to stop bacteria from infecting the ulcer.

Important

Consult a doctor if mouth ulcers:

- Last for three weeks or more, or have not healed with treatment
- Are larger than 1cm across
- Bleed
- Heal with scarring
- Occur often (e.g., every 1-2 weeks)
- Occur with a sore throat, fever or other signs of illness
- Are painless
- Make it difficult to drink adequate fluid.

Consult a dentist if you have sharp tooth edges or dental appliances that seem to trigger mouth ulcers.

Self care

- Keep your mouth and teeth clean with regular brushing and flossing. If the ulcer is too painful to brush your teeth, use an antiseptic mouthwash.
- If mouth ulcers are very painful, use a pain relieving medicine before eating.
- Try sucking on ice to help to reduce the pain of mouth ulcers.
- Brush your teeth gently, using a soft toothbrush.
- Avoid foods and drinks which can cause or irritate mouth ulcers.
- Don't chew and talk at the same time.
- Have dentures checked regularly to make sure they fit well.
- Use orthodontic wax to cover sharp edges on braces and other dental appliances. Ask a dentist or pharmacist.
- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises otherwise).
- Eat regular healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and wholegrain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Consider vitamin and mineral supplements.
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques to help manage stress.
- Don't smoke.

Related fact cards

- *Cold Sores*
- *Dry Mouth*
- *Oral Health*
- *Pain Relievers*
- *Relaxation Techniques*
- *Vitamins*

For more information

New Zealand Dermatological Society Inc – website www.dermnetnz.org

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 131 126.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist