

# Surviving Canker Sores

## by Scott F. Kenward, DMD

If you've ever had a canker sore, you know how painful and annoying they can be.

Found usually on the inside of the lips and cheeks, as well as on the tongue and soft palate, these small ulcers make eating, drinking, speaking and brushing very uncomfortable. Outbreaks may occur anywhere from once or twice a year to continuously. Canker sores or *apthous stomatitis* afflict about 20% of the population.

Although children as young as 2 may develop the condition, most people have their first experience with canker sores between the ages of 10 and 20. They begin as small round reddish swellings, which usually burst within a day. The ruptured sores are covered by a thin white membrane and edged by a raised red rim. Canker sores range in size from an eighth of an inch wide in mild cases to more than an inch wide in severe cases.

Canker sores differ from cold sores (fever blisters) in that they occur in the soft tissues of your mouth and are *not* contagious. Conversely, cold sores are typically found on the outside of the lips and are rarely found on the soft tissues of your mouth. Cold sores are extremely contagious because they're caused by a form of the herpes simplex virus.

### What Causes Canker Sores?

The precise cause of canker sores is unknown. More than one cause is likely, even for individual patients. But certain factors appear to trigger the onset of canker sores in some people, such as:

- Mouth injuries or irritations (accidental tongue, cheek or lip biting or food injury)
- Nutritional deficiencies (iron, zinc, folic acid, vitamin B-12)
- Food allergies (chocolate, mustard, nuts, tomatoes, shellfish, pineapples)
- Toothpaste with Sodium Lauryl Sulfate (SLS) – found in many toothpastes
- Stress and/or immune system disorder
- Gastrointestinal disorders

Women are more likely than men to have recurrent canker sores. Genetic studies show that susceptibility to recurrent outbreaks of the sores is inherited in some patients. This partially explains why family members often share the disorder.

### Treatment

As my oral pathology professor used to say, "Treat a canker sore and it will go away in 7 to 14 days. Don't treat it and it will take 1 to 2 weeks to heal." Nevertheless, there are a few things that the canker sore sufferer can do to help speed healing and minimize the discomfort.

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Avoid abrasive, acidic or spicy foods and brush your teeth gently with warm water to soften the toothbrush bristles. Use an over-the-counter pain reliever, such as aspirin, acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Eat a well-balanced diet and consider taking a good quality multivitamin supplement.

There are several prescription medications that may be helpful in the treatment of canker sores. A corticosteroid gel or cream such as Kenalog in Orabase or Lidex helps to reduce inflammation. Studies have shown that anti-microbial mouthrinses containing chlorhexidine gluconate (Peridex) can shorten healing time, although this mouthrinse can also stain teeth. Aphasol is a relatively new paste used to reduce pain and shorten healing time. Medications containing 2% lidocaine are particularly effective at reducing the pain of severe cases.

Over-the-counter medications include pain-relieving compounds such as Zilactin or Oragel, which also form a protective film over the sore. ORA5 is a topical antibacterial and pain-relieving compound that utilizes iodine and copper sulfate to cover the ulcerated area, greatly reducing the pain. It is relatively inexpensive and is available without a prescription. Ask your dentist which of these treatments would be most appropriate for you.

*Dr. Kenward is a dentist at 12651 South Dixie Highway in Pinecrest. His focus is on cosmetic and preventive dentistry. For more information call 305-255-7722.*