

Canker Sores

Brown Health Services Patient Education Series

What are canker sores?

Canker sores are harmless but painful ulcers often occurring on the soft inner surfaces of the mouth:

- inside the cheeks and lips, on the soft areas of the roof, floor of the mouth, and on portions of the tongue
- often 1/8" to 1/4" in diameter, may be 1/2" or larger
- a yellow-white center surrounded by a narrow ring of reddish, irritated tissue
- roughly oval in shape

The painful phase generally lasts 3 or 4 days, but complete healing may take 7 to 10 days. Canker sores can be a recurring problem for people who suffer from them. Attacks may vary from one sore every 2 or 3 months to rare cases of an uninterrupted succession of multiple ulcers.

What canker sores are not:

First of all, canker sores are not cancerous or precancerous! They are not "cold sores" (caused by the herpes virus). Canker sores are not contagious, just painful and annoying.

What causes them?

No one knows for sure. Possible causes are:

- disturbance of the body's local immune responses or hormonal changes
- deficiency of iron, vitamin B12 and/or folic acid
- Increased stressors
- Ingesting certain foods
- Allergic response

Who gets them?

Canker sores are one of the most common oral irritations, and it has been estimated that somewhere between 20% and 60% of the

population have had canker sores at one time or another. These lesions affect all age groups, but people in their teens and 20's are more likely to develop them. Women are more prone to suffer from canker sores than men. Canker sores may also run in families but they are not contagious.

Why should you see your dentist or medical provider?

True canker sores are not "dangerous" in the medical sense, but as with any persistent sore in your mouth, you should check with your dentist or medical provider for a professional opinion. Because many different oral lesions look similar to the untrained eye, never attempt to diagnose yourself. If you have a mouth sore that does not fit the description mentioned earlier, it should be evaluated - particularly if you engage in oral sex or chew tobacco. Any sore that lasts longer than 2 weeks should be examined by a medical provider or dentist.

What is the treatment for canker sores?

No "cure" has been found for canker sores, but there are medications available and strategies to relieve the symptoms.

- OTC topical pain reliever (for example, Anbesol)
- Ibuprofen or acetaminophen may be used as needed.
- Prescription anesthetic agents, including mouthwash
- Simple rinses with mild salt water
- Try to avoid stress and eat well balanced, nutritious meals.
- Avoid sharp food (e.g. tortilla chips) or toothbrushes, and very spicy or citrus foods which may increase pain.