

# Patient information from BMJ

Last published: Oct 14, 2020

## Mouth ulcers

**Mouth ulcers can be painful, especially if you keep getting them. Fortunately there are treatments that may help your mouth ulcers heal more quickly and hurt less.**

**You can use our information to talk to your doctor or pharmacist and decide which treatments are right for you.**

### What are mouth ulcers?

There are several types of mouth ulcer. But the most common ones, and the ones we cover here, are small, greyish/white sores inside your mouth, in which the top layer of the skin is damaged. Doctors call these ordinary mouth ulcers **aphthous ulcers**.

It's possible to get more than one at a time. They can appear on the inside of the cheeks, inside the lips, and on the tongue. The ulcer is usually red around the rim.

Everyone has mouth ulcers at some point in life. But some people keep getting mouth ulcers every few months or weeks, or even every few days.

Most mouth ulcers are small. They are usually less than 5 millimetres (one-fifth of an inch) across. They usually heal after a week or two. A few people get ulcers that are bigger and take longer to heal. Bigger ulcers can also leave scars.

You can also get lots of small, painful ulcers called herpetiform ulcers. Their exact cause is not known.

In fact, no one really knows what causes most ulcers. But you might be more likely to get them if:

- you have too little iron, folic acid, or vitamin B-12 in your blood. Mouth ulcers can sometimes be caused by a lack of vitamin C, especially in older people.
- you are sensitive to gluten, which is a protein found in wheat (sensitivity to gluten is called coeliac disease).
- you injure your mouth (for example, by biting the inside of your cheek or grazing it with a sharp tooth).
- they run in your family.

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Some people seem to get ulcers after eating or drinking certain things: for example, chocolate, coffee, and peanuts.

In a small number of people, ulcers are caused by infections or other illnesses. If you have ulcers that are bigger than a few millimetres they may be being caused by another condition, and you should see your doctor.

If you get other symptoms with mouth ulcers, such as fever, stomach upset, weight loss, or ulcers elsewhere on your body, tell your doctor. It could be a sign that you have another condition.

### What are the symptoms?

Mouth ulcers can be very sore. Eating or talking may make the pain worse. If you often have difficulty eating because of mouth ulcers, you need to take care that you don't lose too much weight.

If your child has ulcers and refuses to eat, your doctor may suggest ways he or she can get enough nutrients.

### What treatments work?

#### Antiseptic mouthwash

Chlorhexidine is an antiseptic that can make your ulcers less painful and clear up faster. But we're not sure if it can stop you getting repeat attacks of ulcers.

Chlorhexidine can cause mild side effects in some people. For example, some people don't like the taste, and some people say it makes them feel a little sick. If you use it every day, it can stain your teeth and tongue brown. This discoloration should go away when you stop using it.

You should leave an interval of at least 30 minutes between using chlorhexidine and using toothpaste.

Hexetidine and thymol are other antiseptic mouthwashes but they don't seem to have any effect on mouth ulcers.

#### Steroid mouthwashes

Some steroid medicines (the full name is corticosteroids) may make your ulcers less painful and heal them more quickly. But it's not clear whether they will help you get ulcers less often.

These steroid medicines come as mouthwashes, creams, pastes, sprays, and lozenges. You can buy some of these from pharmacies. For others, you'll need a prescription from your doctor or dentist.

The steroids for mouth ulcers have been designed so that very little of the medicine gets into the rest of your body, so side effects are rare. Occasionally, they may cause a mouth infection called thrush.

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## Painkillers that you put on mouth ulcers

You can put some painkillers directly onto mouth ulcers. These come as mouth washes, sprays, lozenges, and gels. They should help to reduce the pain caused by an ulcer, but you may need to keep reapplying them as they can come off easily.

You can buy most of these from a pharmacy. You should read the instructions carefully as some are not recommended for children under 16.

## Things you can do for yourself

Here are some things you can try that may help you when you get mouth ulcers, and that might help you to avoid getting more mouth ulcers:

- Make sure you clean your teeth properly, three times a day, to avoid getting infections.
- Ask your dentist what size toothbrush you should use. The wrong size brush can lead to scratches and other injuries in your mouth that might cause mouth ulcers.
- Avoid acidic drinks, such as fruit juices or fizzy drinks, or drink them through a straw so they don't irritate your mouth.
- Avoid very spicy food and sharp food, such as crisps, which can scratch your mouth.

## What will happen to me?

If your mouth ulcers keep coming back, or if you have an ulcer that takes more than a week to heal, you should see your dentist or doctor.

Having repeat attacks of ulcers can be distressing. You can take painkillers, such as ibuprofen or paracetamol, to help with the pain.

Mouth ulcers are most common in teenagers and young adults. You may find you get them less often as you get older.

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