

Mouth ulcers

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

Mouth ulcers occur on the inside lining of the mouth. Blisters or sores on the lips or around the outside of the mouth are not mouth ulcers. Most mouth ulcers are not harmful and heal on their own in 7–14 days.

Signs and symptoms

Mouth ulcers are small round or oval sores. They are usually yellow, white or grey in the centre, and red and swollen around the edges. They can be very painful and make it hard to eat, speak and swallow.



Causes

Mouth ulcers are often caused by injury to the lining of the mouth or tongue. Sometimes the cause of a mouth ulcer is not known.

Some possible causes of mouth ulcers are:

- biting your cheek or tongue
- burns from very hot food or drinks
- some foods (e.g. citrus fruit, caffeine, tangy cheese, chocolate, spicy or salty food)
- injury from a toothbrush
- irritation from some toothpastes and mouthwashes
- dentures, braces, rough dental fillings and sharp edges on teeth
- some medicines and treatments (e.g. cancer chemotherapy)
- some medical conditions (e.g. infection, inflammatory bowel disease, coeliac disease)
- a dry mouth (which may be due to medicines or medical conditions)
- stopping smoking
- a diet low in some vitamins and minerals (e.g. low iron, folic acid, vitamin B₁₂)
- hormone changes (e.g. menstruation)
- stress (e.g. exam time).

Medicines

Medicines may reduce the pain and speed the healing of mouth ulcers. You can buy mouth ulcer treatments from a pharmacy without a prescription. They are available as pastes, gels, paints, lozenges and mouth washes.

Pastes

- form a protective, soothing layer over the mouth ulcer
- may contain a medicine to reduce pain and swelling.

Gels, paints, lozenges

- may contain an antiseptic to prevent bacteria infecting the ulcer
- may contain medicines to reduce pain and swelling.

Mouthwashes

- are useful to treat mouth ulcers in hard-to-reach places
- may contain an antiseptic to stop bacteria infecting the ulcer
- may contain medicines to reduce pain and swelling.

Self care

- Try to avoid foods and drinks which cause or irritate your mouth ulcers.
- Keep your mouth and teeth clean with regular brushing and flossing. If an ulcer makes it too painful to brush your teeth, use an antiseptic mouthwash to keep your mouth clean.
- Avoid using mouthwashes that contain alcohol. It can dry out your mouth and make mouth ulcers worse.
- Brush your teeth gently, using a soft toothbrush.
- Try using a pain-relieving medicine before eating.
- Try sucking on ice to help ease the pain.
- Have your dentures checked regularly to make sure they fit well.
- Rinse your dentures with water before you insert them.
- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises you not to).
- Have a healthy diet. Eat a variety of vegetables, fruits, wholegrain/ wholemeal foods, protein-rich foods (e.g. nuts, lean meats, fish, eggs, beans) and low-fat dairy foods every day. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Ask your pharmacist or doctor about vitamin and mineral supplements.
- Learn and use relaxation techniques to help manage stress.
- Don't smoke.

Important

Most mouth ulcers are a minor problem and heal on their own. Sometimes they are a symptom of a more serious medical condition. Get medical advice if mouth ulcers:

- last more than 14 days
- are larger than 1 cm across
- heal with scarring
- occur often (e.g. every 1–2 weeks)
- occur in a group of five or more ulcers
- occur with a sore throat, fever or other signs of illness
- do not cause pain
- stop you from eating and drinking
- occur in a child under 10 years of age.

See a dentist if you have sharp edges on a tooth, or a dental appliance that seems to cause mouth ulcers.

For more information

DermNet New Zealand

All about the skin

Website: www.dermnetnz.org

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthdirect.gov.au

NPS MedicineWise

Medicines Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets

Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia

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

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Your Self Care Pharmacy: