

# Health Tips

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## Health Tip: Help for Canker Sores

Canker sores, also known as aphthous ulcers, are small shallow lesions that develop on the soft tissues in your mouth, most commonly inside the cheeks or lips and at the base of the gums. Canker sores are very common, affecting up to 20%-40% of the U.S. population at some point in their lives. They are most common during adolescence and young adulthood, becoming less frequent as we get older.



**What do canker sores look like?** Most canker sores are round or oval and less than 10 mm (1/3 inch) in diameter, but there are also "major" aphthous ulcers that can be much larger. While the smaller sores heal in from 7-10 days, these larger lesions can take up to a month to heal. A third type of aphthous ulcer, herpetiform ulcers, consists of multiple small ulcers.

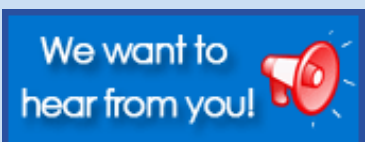
**What causes aphthous ulcers?** The exact cause of aphthous ulcers is not known, although they often occur following an injury, such as when a person has bitten his tongue or cheek. Other factors associated with their development include:

- Stress
- Menstrual periods
- Food allergies
- A diet deficient in Vitamin B12, folic acid or iron
- Certain foods including chocolate, coffee, strawberries, nuts and citrus foods
- Toothpastes containing sodium lauryl sulfate
- Immune deficiencies including HIV and AIDS
- Inflammatory bowel disease and celiac disease (gluten sensitivity)
- Other family members with aphthous ulcers

**How are aphthous ulcers diagnosed?** The diagnosis of aphthous ulcers is made based on the characteristic appearance and clinical course. They can be confused with other mouth ulcers such cold sores or even mouth cancer. Unlike cold sores, which are caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV), canker sores don't occur on the surface of your lips. Mouth cancer may be suspected when a canker sore persists for more than a couple of weeks.

**How are canker sores best treated?** There are a number of prescription,

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OTC, as well as "home remedies" available for treating canker sores. Most minor canker sores, however, heal on their own in a week or two, so treatment may not be necessary. Some of the most commonly prescribed medications for aphthous ulcers include mouth rinses containing the steroid dexamethasone or the antibiotic tetracycline, topical pastes containing either a steroid (Kenalog in Orabase) or amlexanox (Aphthasol paste 5%), topical cauterizing agents such as Debacterol (Sulfuric acid/Phenolic Solution), and the ulcer medication cimetidine (Tagamet).



Self-care measures for easing the discomfort associated with aphthous ulcers include:

- Over-the-counter products that contain a numbing agent, such as Orabase-B, Anbesol and Orajel.
- Rinsing the mouth with either a solution of 1/2 teaspoon salt dissolved in 8 ounces of water or diluted hydrogen peroxide. Another mixture that may be helpful consists of 1-2 tablespoons of Maalox mixed with 1/2 tablespoon of liquid diphenhydramine (Benadryl). A teaspoonful of this can swished and then spit out, up to four times a day.
- Applying a small amount of milk of magnesia or a paste made of baking soda.

**Can aphthous ulcers be prevented?** In many cases, the answer is yes, but some detective work may be necessary to determine the factors that are responsible for their development. If outbreaks follow eating foods such as nuts, chips, pretzels, certain spices, salty foods and acidic fruits, such as pineapple, grapefruit and oranges, these may need to be avoided. Regular brushing after meals and flossing once a day can keep your mouth clean and free of foods that might trigger a sore. Check out the toothpaste label to see if it contains sodium lauryl sulfate, which has been associated with the development of canker sores. In some people, dietary supplementation with vitamins B and C, zinc, or iron or taking the probiotic, acidophilus, may prevent recurrences. Avoiding injury to the mouth, e.g. use of a soft tooth brush, may also help prevent the development of canker sores.

**Final word:** Most canker sores go away on their own in a week or two. Because of the possibility of a more serious problem, such as mouth cancer, check with your doctor or dentist if you have unusually large or painful canker sores or canker sores that don't seem to heal.

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