

MOUTH ULCERS

Mouth ulcers are painful sores that appear inside your mouth. Most are **minor aphthous ulcers**, between 2 and 8mm across and look like pale yellow, round or oval sores, with a red area around them. They aren't very painful and will heal by themselves in less than 2 weeks without leaving a scar.

Major aphthous ulcers are bigger, about 1cm or more across, deeper and more painful. These may take several weeks to heal and often leave a scar. **Herpetiform ulcers** are larger ulcers formed by 5 to 100 tiny mouth ulcers the size of pin heads joining together. These may last for up to 3 weeks. See your doctor or dentist if you have a major aphthous ulcer or herpetiform ulcers.



Mouth ulcers are common and often occur in people who are otherwise healthy. They also seem to run in families. Most single mouth ulcers are caused by damage to the lining inside your mouth, such as: accidentally biting the inside of your cheek, a sharp tooth, badly-fitting dentures, eating hard food, or a defective filling. Mouth ulcers are common in people with a weakened immune system, Crohn's disease, coeliac disease and viral infections such as chickenpox and hand, foot and mouth disease.

Often, mouth ulcers will come back. Triggers thought to cause mouth ulcers to return include:

- stress and anxiety
- medicines such as nicorandil, anti-inflammatory medicines such as ibuprofen, nicotine replacement therapy taken by mouth, or chemotherapy for cancer
- a lack of iron, vitamin B12 or folic acid
- changes in hormone levels
- stopping smoking
- eating certain foods, such as: chocolate, spicy foods, coffee, peanuts, almonds, strawberries, cheese, tomatoes and wheat flour.

How can I treat mouth ulcers?

Most mouth ulcers get better by themselves within 2 weeks. They aren't very painful and don't interfere much with eating.

Salt mouthwashes may help. Dissolve half a teaspoon of salt in a glassful of warm water, swish this around your mouth and spit it out. Do this as often as you need to. Don't swallow the salt mouthwash.

Chlorhexidine mouthwash may help to reduce the pain, help ulcers to heal quicker and stop them getting infected. Use the chlorhexidine mouthwash 2 times a day. Using the measuring cup, swish some of the chlorhexidine mouthwash around your mouth for 1 minute and then spit it out. Chlorhexidine can stain the teeth so only use the mouthwash for 48 hours after the mouth ulcers have gone. Avoid other drinks that can stain your teeth, such as red wine, tea and coffee whilst

using chlorhexidine mouthwash. Wait 30 minutes after brushing your teeth before using the mouthwash, because some ingredients in toothpaste can stop the chlorhexidine from working.

If your mouth ulcer makes eating or drinking uncomfortable, use **hydrocortisone 2.5mg buccal tablets** to help with pain and swelling. Don't give these tablets to children under 12 years old. Put a tablet in your mouth and use your tongue to hold the tablet against the ulcer while it dissolves. Do this 4 times a day for not more than 5 days. If you have more than one ulcer, move the tablet around your mouth between them.

If your ulcer is very painful ask your pharmacist for advice about taking a painkiller.

What else can help?

Your ulcer may heal more quickly if you:

- use a soft toothbrush to brush your teeth
- eat foods that are easy to chew, and avoid hard foods such as toast
- avoid spicy or very salty foods and acidic drinks
- ask your dentist to mend badly fitting dentures or a sharp tooth - these could have damaged your mouth.

You may be less likely to get mouth ulcers again if you:

- work out which foods (if any) trigger your mouth ulcers, and avoid these foods
- take part in activities you find relaxing. Some people find that yoga, meditation or exercise help to relieve stress and anxiety.

Do I need to see my dentist or doctor?

See a dentist or your doctor, if:

- you have had a mouth ulcer for more than 2 weeks. Mouth ulcers may be an early sign that you have another illness, including mouth cancer. Your doctor or dentist can rule out other illnesses as the cause.
- your mouth ulcer is bigger than 1cm across (major aphthous ulcer), or is in a group of 5 or more ulcers (herpetiform ulcer)
- you are not eating or drinking and have signs of dehydration (such as: dry mouth, weeing less, feeling weak, tired, dizzy or light-headed, muscle cramps and pains).
- your mouth ulcer does not hurt
- your mouth ulcer has got more painful or red, or you have a temperature - you may have a bacterial infection
- you are having chemotherapy for cancer
- you are under 12 years old
- you are over 30 years old and have an ulcer for the first time
- you feel very ill
- you also have ulcers outside your mouth.

Where can I find further information?

Patient UK: www.patient.info

A list of dentists accepting NHS patients can be accessed via NHS 111 or NHS Direct Wales.

NHS Direct Wales: www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk

NHS Direct Wales Tel: 0845 4647 (open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

Calls from landlines and mobiles cost 2p per minute, in addition to telephone providers access charge.