

Aphthous ulcers

What are aphthous ulcers?

These are very painful ulcers that arise in the lining of the mouth, usually in the gums between the lower lip and teeth. The small hole on the surface exposes the sensitive tissue beneath. These mouth ulcers are not herpes infections or cancerous.

What do they look like?

The ulcers are small (about 2-3 mm across), shallow and yellow or grey in colour. Each ulcer is surrounded by a bright red halo.

Who gets aphthous ulcers?

Any person can get the ulcers. However, they occur most often in adolescents and young adults and tend to occur more often in women, especially just before a period. Aphthous ulcers are very common and affect at least 1 person in 10.

What causes aphthous ulcers?

The cause is not precisely known. One theory is that a virus or bacteria is able to ulcerate the gum surface when the immune system is below par. Known associations for this are:

- emotional or physical stress
- being 'run down'
- premenstrual tension
- injury such as from rough dentures, dental work, hot food, toothbrushing or biting the mouth
- irritation from certain foods such as citrus fruits, salted nuts, acid foods and chocolate

What are the symptoms?

The first thing you usually notice is eating something acidic (such as a grapefruit or spicy food) that makes the ulcer smart. Sometimes there is burning or tingling for several hours beforehand. The ulcers may be so painful for the first 3 days that they make eating or speaking most uncomfortable.

What is the usual outcome?

Aphthous ulcers are not a serious problem. Most ulcers heal without scarring within 10-14 days. Recurrent attacks of ulcers are quite common in some people. Any ulcer that lasts beyond

3 weeks is unusual. If the doctor is concerned about an ulcer, a blood test or biopsy may be taken.

What is the management?

In most cases the ulcer will heal without any treatment and only feel uncomfortable for 3-4 days. If the ulcer has a known cause, such as a jagged tooth or rough denture, your dentist should be consulted. Some patients simply 'grin and bear it' and wait for healing to occur without applying any agents to the ulcer; they may just take mild pain-killers. Many choose to have treatment to relieve the discomfort.

Eating and drinking

- Avoid eating spicy or sharp-tasting acidic foods (e.g. grapefruit, vinegar).
- Avoid any foods that aggravate the ulcer.
- Drink plenty of fluids and eat soft foods such as yoghurt, ice-cream and custard.
- Reduce the pain by sipping liquids through straws.

Pain relief

Apply a topical anaesthetic such as lignocaine gel or paint (e.g. SM-33 adult paint formula or SM-33 gel for children every 3 hours). This helps eating if applied before meals.

Healing methods

There are several methods that can help healing. One simple method is to rinse the mouth regularly with a salt solution (1 teaspoon to 500 mL of warm water). One of the following can be tried during the painful period of the ulcer.

- *The teabag method:* Apply a wet, squeezed out, black teabag directly to the ulcer 3-4 times daily. The tannic acid promotes healing.
- *Topical steroid paste:* Apply triamcinolone 0.1% (Kenalog in orabase) paste as soon as the ulcer appears, 3-4 times a day.
- *Topical steroid spray:* The sprays used to treat asthma (such as beclomethasone) can be sprayed onto the ulcer 3 times a day.
- *Tetracycline suspension rinse for several ulcers:* Empty the contents of a 250 mg tetracycline capsule into 20-30 mL of warm water and shake it. Swirl this solution in the mouth for 5 minutes every 3 hours. This has a terrible taste and should be spat out after rinsing.