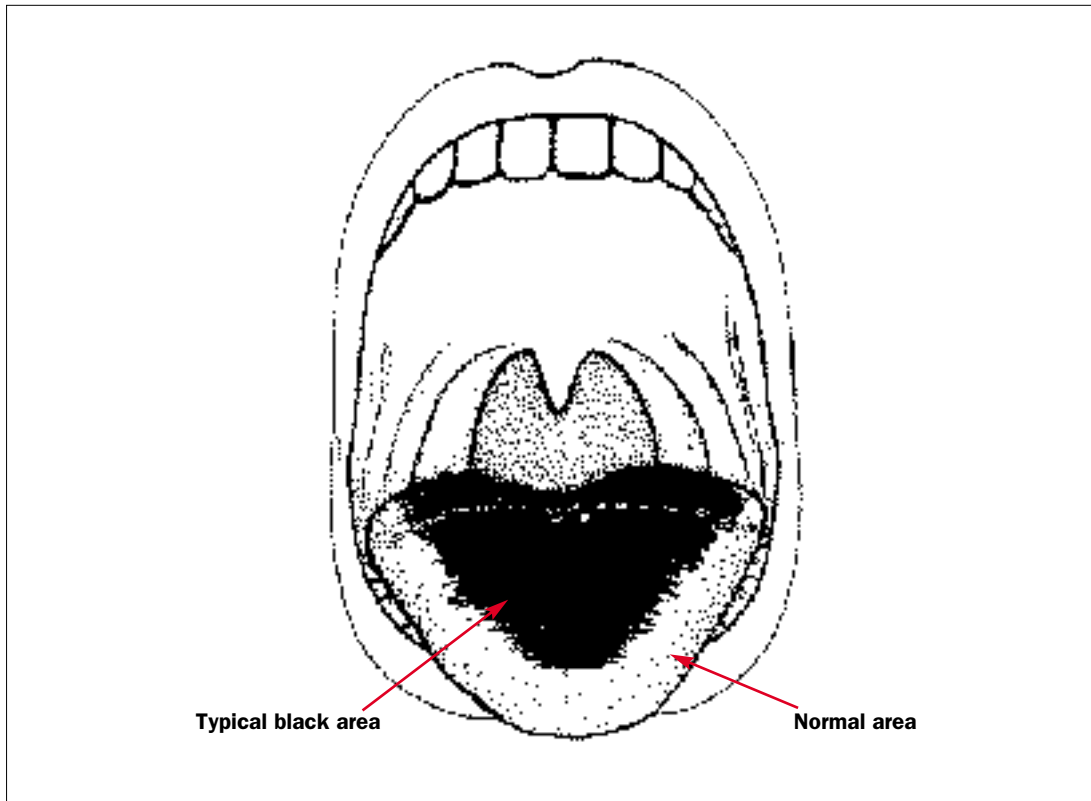


Black tongue



What is black tongue?

Black tongue — sometimes called brown tongue — is a term used to describe a black or dark discolouration or stain of the top surface of the tongue. It is a harmless condition but its appearance and presence cause considerable concern in people affected by it.

What is black hairy tongue?

This is a type of black tongue in which fine, black, hair-like growth is seen on the surface. It is also called glossophytis and is caused by a type of black fungus which can grow on the tongue under certain conditions.

What are the symptoms?

People with black tongue usually complain of a bad taste in their mouth and dryness. It may be responsible for bad breath and associated with feeling “off colour”.

What does it look like?

The tongue is coated with a black-brown stain that may start just beyond the tip but is concentrated mostly at the base of the tongue, especially around the tastebuds. The larger projections called papillae stand out in this dark area. In black hairy tongue the black colour is more striking.

What is the cause?

In many instances its cause is unknown — it just develops. One well-known cause is antibiotic treatment, which can cause an alteration in the normal flora (bacteria and fungi)

which reside in the oral cavity. Stopping the antibiotics will resolve the problem.

Another cause is an inappropriate diet which contains no roughage, especially fruits, vegetables and cereals. This usually is seen in older people who have to battle by themselves and have a tea-and-toast diet.

Poor general oral hygiene with neglected teeth and the use of tobacco and alcohol coupled with poor nutrition is another common association. It may also be associated with stress and a depressive illness.

Who gets black tongue?

Anyone can get it, especially the elderly, the frail and the infirm. Those with the above lifestyle factors are obviously at risk.

Sick people, especially those taking several medications and who are relatively dehydrated, often develop a coated tongue which may or may not be black.

What tests need to be done?

As a rule no investigation is necessary. Sometimes a scraping of the film on the surface may be taken to look for fungus.

What are the risks and the outlook?

There is no risk to the tongue. It is a common harmless condition that invariably improves with time, especially if the lifestyle factors leading to its development are corrected. It can be a self-limiting condition and there are simple remedies that lead to a good outcome.

Treatment

Lifestyle management

This involves a nutritious diet and drinking lots of fresh water. Eating raw fruits and vegetables that provide roughage on the tongue and mouth is advisable. Good examples are apples, celery and carrots.

Try to drink up to two litres of water a day. You can prepare water with lemon juice and use a plastic bottle to squirt it into your mouth several times a day. Otherwise frequent sips of water help the problem. Good dental hygiene is important, so regular checkups are also advisable.

If you smoke or chew tobacco try to quit this habit.

If you are under excessive stress and burning the candle at both ends, try to amend this with a more relaxing, healthy, outdoor lifestyle. Adequate rest and recreation should be a major goal in your life.

The pineapple treatment

Cut a thin slice of fresh pineapple into eight segments. Slowly suck a segment on the back of the tongue for 40 seconds and then slowly chew it. Repeat this until the slice is finished. This should take about eight minutes.

Do this twice a day for 7-10 days, by which time the tongue usually returns to normal. Repeat this should the discoloured tongue return.

If you have irritable bowel syndrome, talk to your doctor because the salicylic acid in pineapple may aggravate the condition.

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