

# SORE SUBJECT



**N**obody wants to admit to having them, but at one time or another, most of us have had or will have mouth sores. These sores can appear any-

where in the mouth, including on the inner cheeks, gums, tongue, lips, or palate. These unpleasant spots can be uncomfortable and annoying, and they can be either physiologically based—bacteria, viruses, or fungal infections—or physically based—a cut from biting your cheek, tongue, or lip, or an irritation from braces, ill-fitting dentures, or a broken tooth, or a burn from drinking a hot beverage.

The two most common types of mouth sores are canker sores and cold sores. Many people confuse these two and think they are the same thing, but they are, in fact, very different.

Canker sores are small ulcers with a pale-colored base (white, yellow, or gray) with a red border. They can be a single sore or a cluster of lesions, and they are not contagious, but they can often recur. The cause of canker sores is not entirely clear, but many experts believe that immune system problems, bacteria, or viruses may be the culprit. Other potential causes could be hormonal changes, stress, mechanical irritation, or low levels of vitamin B-12 or folate in the body. For unknown reasons, according to the National Institutes of Health, women are more likely to suffer from canker sores than men, and this could be due to factors related to hormonal changes. Intestinal problems, such as Crohn's disease or colitis, also may make some people more susceptible to canker sores.

Canker sores—also called aphthous ulcers—typically will heal on their own in about a week or two, but an outbreak may recur. You may find temporary relief from over-the-counter topical anesthetics and antimicrobial mouthrinses, and you should try to stay away from hot, spicy, or acidic foods that can irritate the lesion.

Cold sores, on the other hand, are viral-based and more serious than canker sores. Also known as fever blisters or herpes simplex, cold sores are usually caused by herpes virus type 1, and they are very contagious. They typically appear as clusters of painful, fluid-filled blisters that erupt around the lips and sometimes even under the nose or chin. The initial virus (primary herpes) will often appear before adulthood and may be confused with a cold or flu.

Cold sores typically last a week and will heal on their own. However, once a person is infected with primary herpes, the virus may stay in the body for years and while for some it may remain inactive, for others it may cause occasional outbreaks. Recurring herpes lesions resemble multiple cold sores, and an attack may follow a fever, sun exposure, skin abrasions, hormonal changes, or stress. Over-the-counter topical anesthetics may provide temporary relief, and prescription antiviral drugs may be prescribed to reduce the infection in serious cases.

Mouth sores can also be a symptom that something more serious is going on, so any sore that lasts a week or longer should be checked out by your dentist. **O**



For more information on your oral health, please contact the **Massachusetts Dental Society** at (800) 342-8747 or visit our Web site at [www.massdental.org](http://www.massdental.org).