

# A “Pain” in the Mouth: Mouth Sores

They are annoying, painful, and embarrassing, and can interfere with smiling, eating, and speaking. They affect millions of people every year and are caused by a number of different factors. While some mouth sores are more of a nuisance than anything else, others can be especially harmful to your oral health and overall health. Avoid being down in the mouth by educating yourself about oral lesions: what causes them, how they can be treated, and what you can do to prevent them. Here are the three most common oral lesions.



## CANKER SORES

- Are not contagious
- Most commonly appear on the inside of the mouth
- Can show up as one or multiple sores in your mouth at the same time
- Often return
- Have no known cause, but stress, trauma, food allergies, eating certain foods (such as chocolate, nuts, and citrus fruits), and vitamin deficiencies may be a trigger
- Can be relieved by over-the-counter antibacterial mouthwashes, pain-relieving gels, and saltwater rinses. Consult your dentist if you aren't sure which remedy to use.
- Heal within two weeks—but if yours lasts longer than that, contact your dentist

## ORAL CANCER

- Often starts as a tiny, unnoticed white or red spot or sore anywhere in the mouth
- Other signs include: a sore that bleeds easily or does not heal; a lump or thickening in your mouth or neck; pain, tenderness, or numbness anywhere in your mouth or lips; and difficulty chewing, swallowing, speaking, or moving the jaw or tongue
- More than 30,000 people are diagnosed with oral cancer each year
- Oral cancer most often occurs in people who use alcohol and/or any form of tobacco
- Regular dental checkups that include an oral cancer screening are essential in early detection
- A biopsy is the only way to definitively diagnose oral cancer
- Take an active role in preventing oral cancer by quitting tobacco use, by drinking alcohol in moderation, and by limiting your exposure to the sun

## ORAL HERPES

- Most commonly known as cold sores
- An infection caused by the herpes simplex virus
- Begins as small, usually painful, blisters on the lips or inside the mouth
- Is extremely contagious
- May occur through contact with infected razors, towels, drinking glasses, utensils, and other shared items
- Also spreads through contact, such as kissing or oral sex
- Direct contact for even a short amount of time is enough to spread the virus
- Cannot be cured—once you have herpes, you always will. Even when you don't have any symptoms, the virus is always in your body and can flare up at any time.
- Your health care provider can prescribe medications that can quicken healing and make symptoms less painful, but not prevent future outbreaks



Canker sore and oral cancer photos courtesy of David Reznik, DDS, director of the Oral Health Center of the Infectious Disease Program of Grady Health System in Atlanta