

Patient information

Recurrent aphthous ulcers

What are recurrent aphthous ulcers?

Recurrent aphthous ulcers (RAUs), also known as canker sores, are small, painful ulcers that appear inside the mouth. These ulcers are not contagious, meaning they cannot be spread through contact. The sores usually heal within 7-14 days, without scarring, although some people experience RAUs as a recurring problem, with outbreaks happening periodically.

What are the symptoms?

- Small, round or oval sores that may appear in clusters.
- White or yellow centre with a red border.
- Pain or discomfort when eating, drinking or talking.
- A tingling or burning sensation may be felt before the ulcer forms.

While the exact cause of RAUs is not fully understood, several factors are believed to trigger or worsen the condition, including:

- Minor injuries (eg biting the inside of your cheek or a rough dental appliance)
- Stress or hormonal changes.
- Certain foods like citrus fruits, spicy foods, chocolate and coffee.
- Vitamin deficiencies, especially of Vitamin B12, iron and folic acid.
- Food allergies or sensitivities.
- Immune system issues, such as when your immune system mistakenly attacks the cells in your mouth.
- Genetic factors; if you have a family history of RAUs, you may be more likely to develop them.

RAUs typically appear as:

Shallow, round or oval sores.

- Greyish-white or yellowish centre.
- Surrounded by a red halo or border.
- The ulcers are usually 3-10mm in diameter, with larger ones being more painful.

Where are they commonly seen?

- Inside the cheeks or lips.
- On the tongue.
- On the soft palate (the back part of the roof of your mouth).
- Inside the lower gums.

They do not appear on the outer lips or skin, unlike cold sores.

Are they dangerous?

No, RAUs are generally not dangerous and tend to heal on their own. Frequent or severe ulcers may indicate an underlying health condition, such as an immune disorder or vitamin deficiency. If you have other symptoms, such as unexplained weight loss or difficulty swallowing, it is advisable to consult a healthcare professional.

Helpful measures

- Warm saltwater rinses: These can help reduce pain and inflammation.
- Avoid irritating foods: steer clear of spicy, acidic or rough-textured foods that could worsen the ulcers.
- Topical gels or mouthwashes: over-the-counter products like benzocaine, chlorhexidine or benzydamine hydrochloride (Difflam) can provide relief.
- Good oral hygiene: use a soft-bristled toothbrush to avoid further irritation.
- Avoid toothpaste with sodium lauryl sulphate (SLS) as this can irritate the ulcers.

You should seek medical attention if:

- The ulcer lasts for three weeks.
- You experience severe pain, fever or difficulty swallowing.
- You have very large or spreading ulcers.
- You experience frequent recurrences (more than 3-4 times per year).
- You notice weight loss or other systemic symptoms.
- You think a new medication or health condition could be causing the ulcers.

Contact

- Conquest Hospital Maxillofacial Unit: 0300 131 4500 ext: 773207.
- Eastbourne DGH Maxillofacial and Orthodontic Unit: 0300 131 4500 ext: 771756
- Out of hours: In an emergency, go to your nearest Emergency Department (A&E).

Important information

The information in this leaflet is for guidance purposes only and does not replace professional clinical advice from a qualified practitioner.

Your comments

We are always interested to hear your views about our leaflets. If you have any comments, please contact the Patient Experience Team – Tel: 0300 131 4784 or by email at: esh-tr.patientexperience@nhs.net

Hand hygiene

We are committed to maintaining a clean, safe environment. Hand hygiene is very important in controlling infection. Alcohol gel is widely available at the patient bedside for staff use and at the entrance of each clinical area for visitors to clean their hands before and after entering.

Other formats

If you require any of our leaflets in alternative formats, such as large print or alternative languages, please contact 0300 131 4434 or esh-tr.AccessibleInformation@nhs.net

After reading this information are there any questions you would like to ask? Please list below and ask your nurse or doctor.

Reference

The following clinicians have been consulted and agreed this patient information:
Mr M Shastri – Maxillofacial Consultant.

The directorate group that have agreed this patient information leaflet:
Diagnostics, Anaesthetic and Surgery – Outpatients.

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