

# Erythema multiforme (affecting the mouth)

**This leaflet explains more about having erythema multiforme in your mouth.**

**If you have any further questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.**

## **What is erythema multiforme?**

Erythema multiforme is a condition that causes ulcers in the mouth and on the lips, and sometimes a rash on the skin. It is a condition which comes in 'attacks', when you will experience symptoms. In between these attacks the mouth and skin usually heals completely.

Some people only ever have one attack but others can have many attacks - we call this recurrent erythema multiforme. Recurrent erythema multiforme usually goes away by itself eventually, but this may take many years.

The condition is not contagious and cannot be passed onto another person. It is not hereditary so cannot be passed on to your children.

## **What causes erythema multiforme?**

The exact cause is not known. But during an attack the immune system is overactive and reacts against the body, causing inflammation of the mouth and skin.

In some people an attack can be started by infection with the herpes virus e.g. a cold sore or genital herpes. In others, the attack is started by taking drugs to which they are allergic such as certain antibiotics and painkillers. However in most people we never discover what starts an attack.

## **What are the signs and symptoms?**

Sometimes just before an attack you will feel a tingling or burning sensation in the mouth. In some cases you may develop ulcers in the mouth and on the lips, and sometimes a rash on the skin.

## **Do I need any tests to confirm the diagnosis?**

Sometimes a biopsy is needed. This involves taking a small sample of tissue under local anaesthetic (so that the area we take tissue from is numb). The sample is sent to pathology for examination under a microscope and special tests. Sometimes the diagnosis is made on the appearance alone and sometimes blood tests are required.

## **What treatments are available?**

For patients with mild attacks, it is possible to control the inflammation with mouthwashes which should be started as soon as there are any signs of an attack such as tingling or burning in the mouth.

If attacks cannot be controlled with mouthwashes, you may need to take a short course of steroid tablets starting as soon as there are any signs of an attack. Usually, these treatments are sufficient. It is occasionally necessary to try other oral treatments (taken by mouth) which help to prevent the attacks if they are particularly severe or if they occur very frequently.

If you have frequent attacks started by a herpes infection, a course of anti-viral tablets may be tried for several months. This aims to prevent the herpes infections and thus stop the attacks of erythema multiforme. If you have had attacks started by certain drugs it is very important to avoid taking these drugs in the future. Keep a record of the drug's name for reference. Your doctor should be able to recommend an alternative.

## **What happens if I do not get treatment?**

With no treatment the condition can be very painful but eventually may be self limiting (get better by itself). In severe cases, when there are wide spread skin lesions as well as mouth ulcers, the condition can become very serious if not treated.

## **Is there anything I can do to help?**

The gums are sometimes sore, which makes brushing teeth painful and it may cause bleeding of the gums. However, it is very important to try and continue tooth brushing because if plaque is allowed to build up, not only can the teeth decay, but also the gums may pull away and the teeth may eventually become loose.

To help with tooth brushing, anaesthetic mouthwashes can be used to numb the gums and a soft toothbrush can be used with toothpaste for sensitive teeth. In addition regular treatment from a dental hygienist is recommended to help keep the teeth clean.

## Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about erythema multiforme, please contact the Oral Medicine department on 020 7188 4399, Monday – Friday 9am–5pm.

### Pharmacy medicines helpline

For information about any medicines that you have been prescribed at Guy's and St Thomas' hospitals, you can speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

**t:** 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

### Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust's services, please contact PALS. Ask a member of staff to direct you to the PALS office or:

**t:** 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas'    **t:** 020 7188 8803 at Guy's    **e:** [pals@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk)

### Knowledge & Information Centre (KIC)

For more information about health conditions, support groups and local services, or to search the internet and send emails, please visit the KIC on the Ground Floor, North Wing, St Thomas' Hospital.

**t:** 020 7188 3416

### Language support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch using the following contact details.

**t:** 020 7188 8815    **fax:** 020 7188 5953

### NHS Direct

Offers health information and advice from specially trained nurses over the phone 24 hours a day.

**t:** 0845 4647    **w:** [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

### NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

**w:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

### Become a member of your local hospitals, and help shape our future

Membership is free and it is completely up to you how much you get involved. To become a member of our Foundation Trust, you need to be 18 years of age or over, live in Lambeth, Southwark, Lewisham, Wandsworth or Westminster or have been a patient at either hospital in the last five years. To join:

**t:** 0848 143 4017    **e:** [members@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:members@gstt.nhs.uk)    **w:** [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk)