

Recurrent aphthous stomatitis (mouth ulcers)

This leaflet explains more about having recurrent aphthous stomatitis. If you have any further questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

What is recurrent aphthous stomatitis?

There are many types of mouth ulcers, the most common of which are recurrent aphthous stomatitis (RAS) or ulceration. This is thought to be caused by the body's immune system reacting against the body (autoimmune disease). In some cases it can be made worse by blood deficiencies (for example Vitamin B12 and iron).

In some cases, recurrent aphthous stomatitis may be hereditary and therefore may affect more than one member of the same family. It is not contagious so cannot be passed on to another person.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Recurrent aphthous stomatitis is divided into three categories that relate to the ulcer's size, the number of ulcers and the healing pattern. In all cases, ulcers are yellow with a red border and are oval or round in shape.

These three groups are:

1. Minor recurrent aphthous stomatitis – the most common. They are normally 2mm-10mm in diameter. They usually occur on the lips, cheeks and tongue and heal without scarring.
2. Major recurrent aphthous stomatitis – these ulcers are large and can last from two to six weeks. They can happen anywhere in the mouth including the gums, soft palate (roof of the mouth) and throat.
3. Herpetiform recurrent aphthous stomatitis – these are tiny painful ulcers. Twenty to thirty appear at a time and may join together to form large areas of ulceration.

Do I need any tests to confirm the diagnosis?

Tests, including blood tests, may be performed to exclude any blood deficiencies that could be causing the ulcers. For example, a deficiency of iron, vitamin B12 or folate. If deficiencies are found, your GP will be informed and asked to arrange treatment.

A biopsy (taking a tissue sample) is not usually required.

What treatments are available?

Most people who have mouth ulcers will have them for a long time. The treatment we offer aims to make the ulcers less painful, occur less frequently and heal quicker.

We may offer you a variety of medicines according to the severity of your recurrent aphthous stomatitis when you first present for diagnosis.

- For pain relief, benzydamine (Difflam®) mouthwash is recommended.
- Diluted chlorhexidine (Corsodyl®) mouthwash may be used during ulcer attacks, in addition to tooth brushing.
- To decrease the frequency of the ulcer attacks, you will probably be prescribed a topical steroid in the form of a cream, pellets, spray or mouthwash.
- For severe cases of ulceration, oral medication (those given by mouth) may be required in addition to topical treatments.

We will give you further information on how to use the medicines that are prescribed for you.

What happens if I do not get treatment?

If you do not get treatment, your ulcers will continue or get worse.

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 recurrent aphthous stomatitis, please contact the Oral Medicine department on 020 7188 4399, Monday – Friday 9am–5pm.

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

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

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

t: 020 7188 8801 (PALS) e: pals@gstt.nhs.uk

t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints) e: complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Language Support Services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch:

t: 020 7188 8815 e: languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

t: 111

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

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t: 0800 731 0319 e: members@gstt.nhs.uk w: www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership

Leaflet number: 1804/VER3

Date published: July 2016

Review date: July 2019

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