

We've all had them – those dreaded canker sores!

They can be painful and can make eating and talking difficult. Canker sores also called aphthous ulcers are a common, painful sore in the mouth that may appear on the inner portion (mucosa) of the lips and cheeks, or on the gums.

Q: What causes canker sores?

A: The cause of a canker sore usually cannot be determined. They're auto-immune, which means that your body is basically attacking itself. Canker sores may also occur after an injury to the mouth following dental work, aggressive tooth brushing, or biting the tongue or cheek.

Canker sores can also be triggered by the following:

- Emotional stress
- Lack of certain vitamins and minerals in your diet (especially iron, folic acid, or vitamin B-12)
- Hormones

Also, the tendency to develop canker sores may run in families.

Q: How do you know if you actually have a canker sore?

A: Symptoms include:

- One or more painful, red spots or a bump that develops into an open ulcer
- Middle of the sore is white or yellow
- Usually small (under 1 cm) but occasionally larger
- Sore may turn gray just before starting to heal

Some cases of canker sores may be associated with fever or swollen lymph nodes ("glands") in the neck, but these are less common symptoms.

Q: How long do canker sores last?

A: The pain caused by a canker sore usually goes away after 7 -10 days, but it may take 1 - 3 weeks for the sore to completely heal. Large canker sores may take longer to heal.

Q: What's the difference between a canker sore and a cold sore?

A: A canker sore is not the same as a fever blister (cold sore) that is the result of a herpes virus infection. Unlike cold sores, canker sores don't occur on the surface of your lips and aren't contagious.

Q: How are canker sores treated?

A: Most canker sores will heal on their own – but here are a few treatments that can soothe and may also help the sore heal:

- Avoid eating spicy foods that can irritate the sore
- Rinse your mouth with salt water may offer some relieve
- Some over-the-counter medicines can be applied directly to the sore and may offer temporary pain relief
- One home remedy is to create a mixture of 1/2 hydrogen peroxide and 1/2 water. Use a cotton swab to apply the mixture directly to the canker sore. A small dab of Milk of Magnesia may also be applied to the sore with a Q-tip 3-4 times a day. Prescription medications may be recommended for severe cases.