

# UniversityHealthServices

We heal. We educate. We care.

## Mouth Ulcers

*Aphthous Ulcers (pronounced ap-thus) and Herpes Simplex are the most common mouth ulcers.*

### **Aphthous Ulcers**

Aphthous ulcers are recurrent clusters of small, painful ulcers (one to five) appearing in the mouth and usually starting between the ages of 10 and 19. The ulcers are usually green-yellow with a raised, red border and usually less than one-half inch in size.

The cause of aphthous ulceration is not known with certainty. What triggers the ulcers is far from clear, but there is little doubt some form of minor mouth trauma plays a role. It is generally accepted that mental stress can also precipitate attacks.

Diagnosis of aphthous ulcers is made by examination and clinical history. Most heal in 10 days without any specific treatment.

### **Herpes Simplex**

Herpes Simplex (“cold sores” or “fever blisters”) is caused by a virus and may occur once or return again and again. There are two kinds of herpes virus, Type I and Type II. Type I virus usually causes “cold sores” on the lips or face, while genital herpes is usually caused by Type II virus.

Herpes Simplex begins as a group of small red bumps that blister. You may have noticed itching or discomfort before the rash appeared. The blisters begin to dry up after a few days and form yellow crusts. The crusts gradually fall off and leave slowly fading red areas. The whole process takes about 10-14 days. No scars form.

The very first infection with Type I Herpes usually occurs in childhood. It may go unrecognized, but often it causes fever, general illness, and much local soreness. Once you’ve had a herpes simplex infection, the virus becomes permanently established in your nerve tissue. Recurring herpes results from activation of this virus. Between attacks it lives quietly in nerve tissue.

Fever and sun exposure are the most common factors triggering reactivation of Type I Herpes Simplex virus. Often the virus becomes activated without any apparent reason.

Like most other viruses, the Herpes Simplex virus is contagious to people who have never had the infection before. Herpes Simplex I is not very contagious. Close contact such as kissing is necessary to transmit the infection.

While there is no cure for herpes infections, there is effective symptomatic treatment. Herpes Simplex often heals by itself in about 10 days.

### **Herpes Simplex in the Eye**

Recurring herpes is usually only an uncomfortable nuisance. One exception is herpes of the eye. Since it may lead to eye damage, you should see an eye doctor (ophthalmologist) immediately. Fortunately, herpes infections of the eye are rare. Herpes simplex around the eye is not dangerous unless it involves the eye.

### **Preventing Recurrences**

Herpes simplex Type I is unpredictable. It may attack every few weeks for months, then may not come back for years. Antiviral medications such as Acyclovir and Valtrex can suppress the outbreak of recurring herpes infections.

Prevention of recurring herpes simplex is sometimes possible when attacks are triggered by sunlight. If sunlight acts as an activator for your herpes simplex, you should use a sunscreen on and around your lips when you go outside.

### **How Are Mouth Ulcers Treated?**

- Drink cool liquids or eat frozen juice bars to reduce discomfort.
- Maintain strict oral hygiene. Mouthwashes may be useful in reducing secondary infections.
- Use Acetaminophen (Tylenol) to relieve minor pain. Do not use aspirin. The use of aspirin during some viral illnesses may lead to Reye's syndrome, a form of encephalitis.
- While there is oozing and crusting, use diluted vinegar compresses. Mix two tablespoons of white vinegar with a quart of lukewarm water. Apply this diluted vinegar solution to your blisters with a clean cloth for 10 to 15 minutes two to three times daily. Later on, when the blisters become yellow and crusted, you can relieve any cracking and dryness with a small amount of plain white petroleum jelly.
- Numbing sprays and lozenges such as Chloraseptic, Cepacol, Sucrets, and Nice may be used as a last resort to give a brief period of relief from pain when eating a meal.
- Wash your hands often during a flare-up to avoid spreading virus.

### **Please Read**

Please call the advice nurse at 863-4463 if any of the following problems occur:

- Signs of secondary bacterial infection, such as fever, pus instead of clear fluid in the lesions, headache, and muscle aches.
- Eruptions of lesions on the genitals similar to those around the mouth.
- Eye involvement. If the eye is infected there is eye pain, redness, and a feeling that something is in the eye. There is also sensitivity to light and tearing.
- New unexplained symptoms. Drugs used in treatment may produce side effects.

If University Health Services is closed, you may also go to Mount Nittany Medical Center Emergency Department or call 911.

### **Test Results and Advice Nurse**

Please call the nurse for test results and advice: 863-4463

### **Appointments**

Appointments can be made in person or by phone. If you are unable to keep your appointment, please call and cancel. Otherwise you will be charged for the visit.

To schedule or cancel appointments, call: 863-0774

For more information about health care issues, visit the UHS Web site at [www.sa.psu.edu/uhs](http://www.sa.psu.edu/uhs)

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

Derm\_Ent\_Aphthous\_030103      Approved by Patient Education Committee: 03/03

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. This information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.

