

## Canker Sores and Cold Sores

### Description

---

Canker sores (aphthous ulcers) and cold sores (fever blisters) are two of the most common diseases affecting the mouth. There is no complete cure for either one, but there are some things you can do to ease the discomfort. Both canker sores and cold sores cause painful lesions in and around the mouth that usually last one to two weeks. However, the two diseases are different from each other, and those differences are pointed out below.

### Canker Sores

---

About half the population will get a canker sore sometime. Half of the people in high stress situations will get them. Canker sores are **NOT CONTAGIOUS**. You don't need to worry about spreading them by kissing or sharing eating utensils for example. They are found on the movable parts of the mouth like the tongue and the inside lining of the cheeks and lips but not the gums or roof of the mouth, where cold sores can occur.

The cause of canker sores is unknown. They may be caused by a virus others seem to be due to an allergy to bacteria that we normally have in our mouth. Others are apparently caused by trauma, food allergy, or a malfunction in our immune system. Rarely, a deficiency of vitamin B-12, folic acid, or iron may be the cause.

Canker sores tend to run in families. Women may only get them at certain times of the menstrual cycle, while they may not occur at all during pregnancy. If you find certain foods add to the pain and irritation from the sore, you should eliminate them from your diet. Common culprits include acetic and salty foods, such as citrus fruits, chocolate, and various kinds of chips. When canker sores are present, pain may be so severe that eating and talking are difficult.

### Cold Sores

---

Almost half of the adult population has had a cold sore, also known as fever blister, at least once. Cold sores are contagious and are caused by various strains of the Herpes Simplex Virus. They can be spread by touch, kissing, or sharing eating utensils. If you have a cold sore, avoid touching it. They usually occur on non-movable parts of the mouth, like gums or roof of the mouth, as well as the outside of the lips and nostrils.

Before people can actually see them, they often notice a feeling of tightness, soreness, burning, or swelling at the site where the sore is developing. A group of small blisters appear, break, and may grow together to form one large, irregular sore. Scabs form and healing takes place in one to two weeks without scarring.

Some people may experience only one attack; others will have recurrences throughout their life. Women may only get them at certain times during their menstrual cycle. When cold sores are present, pain may be so severe that eating and talking are difficult. Factors that may lead to an outbreak of cold sores include:

- Sunlight
- Tanning booths
- Fever
- Stress or excitement
- Illness or injury
- Fatigue
- Windburn
- Chilling

If you get cold sores in response to sunlight, you should avoid tanning booths, use sunscreens, and wear a hat to keep damaging rays from reaching exposed areas.

## Diagnosis and Treatment

---

There are several non-prescription medications that may help. Some ointments or liquids contain topical anesthetic pain relievers like benzocaine. Other pain relievers, like menthol or phenol also work, but can irritate and damage the tissue if used for too long. Some products are promoted to stop the growth of the Herpes virus. These are intended for use against cold sores.

Some products contain sunscreen agents. Others are made so that they will stick to the wet tissue inside the mouth. They provide a coating film to help keep the sore from further irritation. Canker sores can be treated with prescription paste. Severe cases of cold sores may require a prescription ointment or even a powerful prescription that is swallowed. As with all powerful prescription drugs, there is a risk of side effects, and therefore these medications should not be used unless truly necessary.

The correct choice of therapy depends on:

- Whether you have a canker sore or cold sore
- Where it appears
- How severe your sore is
- Your exposure to sunlight
- What has worked for you in the past
- Allergies you may have
- Other important factors

Your medical provider can usually diagnose whether you have a canker sore or cold sore when the blisters are present

**Ask your medical provider or pharmacist for a recommendation.**

### For More Information:

---

Student Health Services . . . . .619-594-5281  
Health Promotion. . . . .619-594-4133  
Visit Our Website at . . . . . shs.sdsu.edu  
Facebook/Twitter. . . . .Facebook.com/aztechealth &  
@AZTEChalth