



Is Your Sore Cantankerous?

Canker sores (aphthous ulcers) are often confused with cold sores (fever blisters). They are quite different, however. Canker sores are only found inside the mouth on the gums, cheeks, tongue, or floor of the mouth. They cannot be transmitted from one individual to another.

Canker sores begin as small red circular swellings that usually ulcerate (rupture) within a day, after which they become white, surrounded by reddish inflammation. As open sores, they can be very painful to the touch. Canker sores afflict about 20 percent of the population. Their cause has yet to be discovered, although they appear more often in stressful situations, from getting a small “nick” in the skin (mucous membrane), or from acidic foods such as citrus fruits and tomatoes.

While they can occur in very young children, they are usually first seen between the ages of 10 and 20. It’s not uncommon for them to erupt three to four times a year, occurring less frequently or stopping altogether in adults. They can last eight to ten days.

When experiencing canker sores, avoid rough textured or spicy foods that may irritate them. Try not to touch them with eating utensils or your toothbrush. Apply ointment

that contains a topical anesthetic or some other active ingredient that will relieve the irritation or call your dentist for recommendations.

Cold sores are found outside the mouth, usually on the lips but may appear on the chin, outside of the cheek, or around the nostrils. They begin as a red blister, break and then scab over. The cycle takes seven to fourteen days to heal. Cold sores, caused by the herpes simplex virus, are contagious and are transmitted by skin-to-skin contact. The virus is dormant most of the time and is carried by almost everyone. Cold sores occur most often in adolescents and young adults and decline in people over 35. Certain factors activate their outbreak, particularly stress, colds, fevers and/or sunburn.

To reduce occurrences, avoid kissing when the blisters are visible, don’t squeeze or scrape the blister, wash your hands thoroughly before touching someone else, and use UV sunscreen on your lips before spending time in the sun.

Treatment of cold sores includes avoiding spicy or hot foods and applying prescription or over-the-counter ointments that contain either phenol and/or anti-viral medication, which can shorten their duration.