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The Mystery of Burning Mouth Syndrome

It shows up without warning, can be difficult to diagnose and even more difficult to treat

If you've ever scalded your tongue on something hot — soup, coffee, curry — you know what a relief it is when that burning feeling subsides. But for people who experience a condition called burning mouth syndrome (BMS), that sensation just doesn't go away.

BMS appears suddenly and, often, for no apparent reason. It can be quite

severe — and very frustrating! The discomfort can affect your tongue, lips, palate or your entire mouth. It's something of a mystery disease, since the cause can be difficult to determine, and there's no definitive cure. But, armed with the following information, and with the help of your dentist and physician, you can get BMS under better control.



Symptoms

Besides oral burning, you may experience a dry, gritty feeling in the mouth, as well as numbness, tingling and alterations in taste, says Dr. Victor Kutcher, a periodontist in Burlington, Ont., and ODA Vice-President (2013-14). For many people, the burning sensation begins in late morning, builds to a peak by evening and often subsides at night. Some people feel constant pain; for others, the pain comes and goes. Whatever the pattern, BMS may last for months or for years.

Causes

BMS can affect anyone, but it's most common in women 50 to 70 years of age, says Dr. Kutcher. It has been associated with a number of conditions, including hormonal changes, neurological issues, nutritional deficiencies, stress, smoking, poorly fitting dentures, allergies, oral candidiasis (a fungal infection in the mouth), dry mouth (which can be caused by many medicines and disorders such as Sjögren's syndrome or diabetes), and anxiety and depression. But in many cases, the exact cause — or causes — is elusive. "I like to reassure patients if the cause is unknown, that BMS is not infectious or inherited, as they may worry about passing it onto their loved ones," says Dr. Deborah Saunders, Medical Director of the Dental Oncology Program at Northeast Cancer Centre in Sudbury, Ont., and Assistant Professor at the Northern Ontario School of Medicine.

Diagnosis

A review of your medical history, a thorough oral examination and a general medical examination by your physician and a dental professional trained in managing this condition may help identify the source of your burning mouth. Blood tests and a biopsy may be required. Often, however, there are no abnormal clinical or laboratory findings, says Dr. Kutcher.

Treatment

Depending on the cause of your BMS symptoms, treatment will be tailored to your individual needs. That may include:

- adjusting or replacing poorly fitting dentures.
- taking supplements for nutritional deficiencies.
- switching medications, if possible.

When no underlying cause can be found, treatment is aimed at the symptoms. Avoidance of alcohol and certain foods is often recommended.

As frustrating as this condition is, keep in mind that there are no long-term health consequences, other than the discomfort it brings, says Dr. Saunders. ■

Helpful Tips

In addition to medical treatment, there are some self-help measures you can try:

- drink water regularly to keep the mouth lubricated
- avoid spicy, hot and acidic foods (citrus fruits and juices, for example)
- take steps to reduce excessive stress



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