

COMMON SYMPTOMS OF LEUKOPLAKIA

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Abstract

Most leukoplakia patches are not cancer. But some patches show early signs of cancer. Cancers in the mouth can occur next to areas of leukoplakia. White areas mixed with red areas, also called speckled leukoplakia, may possibly lead to cancer. It's best to see your dentist or doctor if you have any changes in your mouth that do not go away.

Keywords: Primary prevention, dental, oral diseases, oral health.

Introduction

Leukoplakia (loo-koh-PLAY-key-uh) causes thick, white patches that form on the gums. The patches also may form on the insides of the cheeks and the bottom of the mouth. Sometimes the patches form on the tongue. These patches cannot be scraped off.

Doctors do not know the exact cause of leukoplakia. But ongoing irritation from tobacco — whether smoked, dipped or chewed — may be the most common cause. Long-term alcohol use is another possible cause.

Leukoplakia usually occurs on the gums, the insides of the cheeks, the bottom of the mouth under the tongue and, sometimes, the tongue. Usually it is not painful and it may not be noticed for a while.

Leukoplakia may appear as:

- White or gray patches that cannot be wiped away.
- Patches with a rough, ridged, wrinkled or smooth surface, or a combination of these.
- Patches with shapes and edges that are not regular.
- Thick or hard patches.

White patches of leukoplakia may appear along with raised, red areas called erythroplakia (uh-rith-ro-PLAY-key-uh). This combination is called speckled leukoplakia. These patches are more likely to show changes that may lead to cancer.

Hairy leukoplakia

Hairy leukoplakia causes fuzzy, white patches that look like folds or ridges. The patches usually form on the sides of the tongue. Hairy leukoplakia is often mistaken as oral thrush, an infection that causes creamy white patches that can be wiped away. Oral thrush also is common in people with weak immune systems.

Causes

The exact cause of leukoplakia is not known. But long-term irritation from tobacco use — smoked and smokeless — appears to be strongly related to many cases. Often, regular users of smokeless tobacco products get leukoplakia in places where they hold the tobacco between their gums and cheeks.

The use of betel nut, also called an areca nut, may be a cause of leukoplakia. A betel nut packet, like smokeless tobacco, is held between the gum and cheek.

Other possible causes may include ongoing irritation from:

- Long-term, heavy alcohol use.
- Jagged, broken or sharp teeth rubbing on tongue surfaces.
- Broken dentures or dentures that do not fit well.

Your doctor or other healthcare professional can talk with you about what may be causing leukoplakia.

Risk factors

Tobacco use, particularly smokeless tobacco, puts you at high risk of leukoplakia and mouth cancer. Long-term, heavy alcohol use increases your risk. Drinking alcohol combined with using tobacco increases your risk even more.

Complications

Leukoplakia usually does not cause permanent damage to the inside of the mouth. But leukoplakia increases the risk of mouth cancer. Mouth cancers often form near leukoplakia patches. And the patches themselves may show cancerous changes. Even after leukoplakia patches are removed, the risk of mouth cancer remains.

Prevention

You may be able to prevent leukoplakia if you avoid all tobacco products or alcohol use. Talk to your doctor or other healthcare professional about ways to help you quit. If you continue to smoke or chew tobacco or drink alcohol, have dental checkups often. Mouth cancers are usually painless until advanced. Quitting tobacco and alcohol is a better way to prevent mouth cancers.

Summary

More often than not, white patches in the mouth should provide very few reasons to worry.

However, if the patches do not resolve or become painful and persistent, they may be due to leukoplakia. Only a doctor can diagnose this condition. Leukoplakia can increase the risk of oral cancer.

Doctors do not know what causes leukoplakia, although smoking and HPV infection are major risk factors. People with reduced immunity might also develop leukoplakia.

Avoiding or quitting smoking and maintaining good oral hygiene are effective methods for reducing the risk of the condition.

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