Treating Canker Sores

By Dondi Byrne, RPh

As a neighborhood pharmacist, I am frequently asked to recommend a product for "a cold sore in my mouth". People easily confuse cold sores and canker sores. Canker sores are small shallow lesions in the oral mucosa but unlike cold sores they do not occur on the lips and are not contagious. They can be oval or round with a white or yellow center in the middle of a red border.

Unlike cold sores that are caused by a virus, the exact cause of canker sores (also known as aphthous ulcers) is unknown although they can be associated with certain conditions and triggers. Triggers would include; a minor injury to your mouth from teeth brushing, accidental cheek bites, trauma from dental procedures, using toothpaste that
contains sodium lauryl sulfate, foods like chocolate, coffee, strawberries, eggs, nuts or highly acidic or spicy foods, emotional stress, diets lacking zinc, folate or B-12 and hormonal shifts during menstruation.

People who have certain diseases and conditions also seem to be more prone to outbreaks of canker sores. Some of these include Inflammatory Bowel Disease, Celiac disease, HIV/AIDS and many other conditions associated with a suppressed immune system.

Females and a family history of frequent canker sores are risk factors for infection as well. Approximately 33% of reoccurring canker sores have a family history. This is thought to be because of heredity factors or shared environmental factors such as exposure to certain allergens and foods.

A formal diagnosis of a canker sore can be made by a dentist or doctor usually with just a visual inspection. Canker sores are usually self-limiting and clear in one or two weeks on their own. However they can be painful and make talking and/or eating difficult. Symptomatic treatment goals such as pain control, improved healing time and reducing recurrences can usually be accomplished using over-the-counter products such as include mouth rinses, topical pastes or gels, oral medications and nutritional supplements.
There are a variety of mouth rinses available for wound cleansing and debriding. Peroxyl Dental Rinse contains 1.5% hydrogen peroxide; Cankaid Liquid and Gly-Oxide Liquid are both solutions of 10% Carbamide peroxide. These solutions may be applied directly to the lesions.

Topical gels and ointments available for pain relief are similar to those used for cold sores. They contain benzocaine, menthol and phenol. Some products that easily found at most pharmacies are Anbesol Liquid (benzocaine 10%), and Orabase or Zilactin-B (benzocaine 20%). Carmex and Campho-Phenique are combos of Camphor, menthol and phenol. These topicals work best when the canker sore is dried with a cotton swab or gauze, applied sparingly to the ulcer 3-4 times daily and then not eating or drinking for 30 minutes after application.

Oral analgesics such as acetaminophen, non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (naproxen and ibuprofen) and aspirin can be used as well for additional relief.

There are home remedies that many people find as effective as well. Examples of a few are to:

One teaspoon of baking soda dissolved in ½ cup of warm salt water or 1 part Benadryl liquid and 1 part Maalox mixed together then used to rinse the mouth and expectorated.
Dab a small amount of Milk of Magnesia on the canker sore a few times daily.

Apply ice chips to the canker sore and allow them to slowly melt.

Some general tips to reduce the frequency of getting canker sores are the following:

Eat a well-balanced and nutritious diet to support a healthy immune system.

Don't chew and talk at the same time to avoid minor trauma to the lining of your mouth.

Regularly brush with a soft brush and avoid toothpastes containing sodium lauryl sulfate.

Cover sharp edges of dental appliances such as braces with a dental wax.

Avoid or limit foods that may cause or exacerbate canker sores such as acidic foods like pineapple, grapefruit and oranges. Nuts, chips pretzels that may scrape the mouth lining can make oral tissue more prone to developing canker sores. Also spicy and salty foods can cause mucosal irritation leaving the tissue more prone to developing canker sores.
Some individuals who may have large, persistent or unusually painful sores often need medical care and should be referred to a physician or dentist for more aggressive treatments.

Remember that canker sores are not a serious medical problem for most people and cannot be passed from one individual to another but they are bothersome and do cause pain and discomfort. Many of the products mentioned in this podcast can give some relief and the pharmacists at Island Drug will be happy to recommend an appropriate product for those having canker sores. So please come in and visit us and we will be happy to help you.

References:


Available at www.pharmacytimes.com.

Available at www.pharmacistletter.com

Mayo Clinic Letter. March 24, 2012

www.mayoclinic.com