

From a blotchy tongue to bad breath, your mouth can be the key to understanding more about your health...

# Get *mouthy!*

**G**oing to the dentist might fill you with dread, but if you skip visits you could be missing key warning signs about other issues in your body. Dr Ben Atkins, a dentist and spokesperson for The Oral Health Foundation, reveals what various dental issues could potentially mean for your broader well-being.

## Be vigilant

Your mouth is the only part of your body that you can easily see

into without cutting it open – it's literally a gateway to your insides. It can therefore tell you so much about what's going on elsewhere. Indicators that something is wrong, from diabetes to immune problems, could be present in your mouth before you start to feel unwell. That's why you need to see your dentist regularly – as often as he or she recommends – and get anything unusual checked out in-between routine appointments. Here are some of the things you should watch out for...

## White patches

Leukoplakia is the most common cause of white patches on your tongue, with one in 100 people getting it at some point in their life. It's linked to an increased risk of developing mouth cancer (though most cases don't become cancerous). You should see your dentist if a white patch hasn't vanished within 14 days.

Leukoplakia can also develop on your gums, on the soft palate, on the inner lip and inside the

cheek. Giving up smoking and cutting back on alcohol improves symptoms – and reduces the risk of developing them in the first place.

## White spots

If you notice white spots in your mouth, possibly accompanied by a burning sensation, cracks in the corner of your mouth and loss of taste or an unpleasant taste, you may be suffering from oral thrush. This is a fungal infection caused by a group of yeasts called candida.



## Bad breath

Everyone gets 'morning breath' but if your breath isn't fresh even after cleaning your teeth, you need to check that there's not an underlying cause. There are two main smells that may indicate a further problem...

**Fruity breath** This can indicate diabetes. People who have diabetes can also develop severe gum disease if their condition isn't being controlled, so keep an eye out for bleeding and sensitive gums. If you do have diabetes, you may take longer to heal after surgery, so tooth extractions and any other kind of dental surgery need to be thoroughly discussed with your dentist.

**Ammonia breath** This might suggest kidney problems. If your body is struggling to break down waste products properly, the smell will emit elsewhere too – causing breath that smells urine-like. If your dentist agrees this may be your problem, you should be sent for blood tests to check that your kidneys are functioning properly.

Mouth cancer is increasing, and it often presents itself initially as an ulcer

and it should clear up with antifungal medication.

Thrush is an opportunistic infection that may indicate that something is wrong elsewhere, such as diabetes, an underactive thyroid or an iron or vitamin B12 deficiency. It can also be caused by using corticosteroid inhalers for asthma, poor oral hygiene, wearing dentures, taking antibiotics for a long period of time and smoking.

Lichen planus can also cause white marks in your mouth, creating a pattern on your tongue,

inner cheeks and gums. It's a lifelong disease that will only need treatment if you have a painful flare-up. Attributed to a weakness in the immune system, or a reaction to some medicines, it shouldn't cause you any problems other than the odd sore patch, which can be treated with corticosteroid cream.

Spicy foods and citrus fruits can aggravate it, and emotional stress can also trigger a flare-up.

## Burning mouth

Glossodynia, also known as burning mouth syndrome (BMS), is when any part of your tongue, lips or mouth feels hot – though it won't feel hot to the touch and may well look perfectly normal.

This uncomfortable sensation can be caused by hormonal changes and the menopause, stress, anxiety and even a reaction to your toothpaste or mouthwash. However, BMS can also hint at more serious health concerns, such as diabetes, thyroid problems and iron deficiency.

Something else that needs to be ruled out is Sjögren's syndrome, which reduces the production of saliva. Sjögren's may be your only problem – or it may accompany an immune system disorder such as lupus or rheumatoid arthritis.

If you're struggling with the effects of BMS, avoid alcohol and spicy food as these will hurt the soft tissue in your mouth.

## Mouth ulcers

Many people have had 'traumatic' mouth ulcers. They can be caused by something like a sharp tooth biting your cheek, and once the cause is removed the ulcers will stop and disappear.

Ulcers that can't be attributed to a trauma and keep coming back are known as recurrent aphthous stomatitis and these need a little more attention.

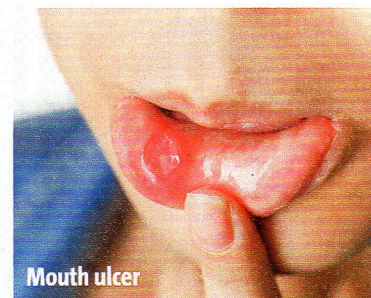
They're sometimes linked to infections, but can also be a warning sign of anaemia and other blood disorders.

The best advice for coping with these ulcers is to use an antibacterial mouthwash such as Corsodyl to stop an infection getting into the wound.

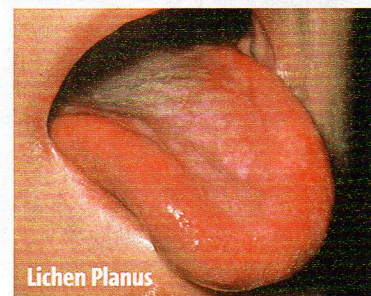
If an ulcer lasts for more than three weeks, go straight to the dentist – mouth cancer is increasing, and it often presents itself initially as an ulcer that won't heal, so be vigilant.

## Dry mouth

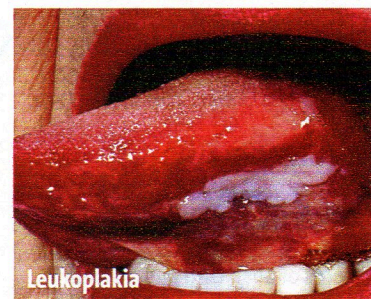
Having a regularly dry mouth (known as xerostomia) is the result of not enough saliva being



Mouth ulcer



Lichen Planus



Leukoplakia

produced. This can be caused by a range of factors such as a side effect of certain medicines, stress and hormonal changes. Other more chronic causes include diabetes, lupus, Sjögren's syndrome and blocked salivary glands.

To alleviate the symptoms of a dry mouth, drink water or suck crushed ice. Dentists also recommend that you chew sugar-free gum after meals to produce more saliva.

While you're getting to the bottom of the problem, you'll need to be particularly careful with your teeth, as the reduced saliva flow can lead to tooth decay.

Increase the amount of fluoride in your diet by brushing twice a day, although you shouldn't use mouthwash immediately afterwards as it will wash the fluoride away. Instead, use mouthwash at lunchtime and talk to your dentist about using a prescription fluoride toothpaste.

He or she can also prescribe artificial saliva products, sprays and lozenges.

● For more information visit [The Oral Health Foundation](http://TheOralHealthFoundation.org) at [dentalhealth.org](http://dentalhealth.org).