



DIAGNOSIS • TREATMENT
EDUCATION & RESEARCH

Burning Mouth/ Burning Tongue Syndrome



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Oral and Maxillofacial Pathology

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What is burning mouth syndrome?

Burning mouth syndrome is a relatively common condition that is characterized by a complaint of an abnormal sensation of the lining of the mouth that most patients describe as feeling like their mouth has been scalded. Usually this sensation develops in the front part of the mouth, typically affecting the inner surfaces of the lips, the roof of the mouth and the sides and tip of the tongue. In some patients, only the tongue will be affected, however, any combination of these sites may be seen. Some patients may have a decreased taste ability or altered taste sensation (bitter or salty). Other patients may feel that their mouths are dry or sticky. In all cases, however, the lining of the mouth clinically appears normal.

Who gets burning mouth?

Most patients who develop burning mouth syndrome are post-menopausal women. We usually see about ten women for every man who has burning mouth syndrome. This is a relatively common problem that is seen all over the world. For example, in Holland, patients with burning mouth syndrome have formed a support group. This seems to

be a condition that affects people of all races and all socioeconomic backgrounds.

What causes burning mouth?

Nobody knows for sure. There are a few uncommon diseases that should be tested for, such as anemia, diabetes and oral yeast infections. For most patients with burning mouth syndrome, however, those tests turn out to be normal. Some investigators have suggested that burning mouth may be a problem related to the nerves in the mouth. We know that burning mouth is not related to anything serious, such as cancer or AIDS. Furthermore it is not contagious — it can't be passed from one person to another.

How do doctors diagnose burning mouth syndrome?

Burning mouth syndrome is diagnosed by doing blood tests and cultures to make certain that one of the other problems mentioned previously is not present. If those tests are all negative, and if the lining of the mouth appears normal, then we can make a diagnosis of burning mouth syndrome.

How is burning mouth syndrome treated?

Unfortunately, no one has developed a medically proven treatment for burning mouth syndrome. The main problem is that we don't know what causes burning mouth syndrome, therefore it is difficult to develop a treatment for the condition. A variety of medications (including anti-depressants, anti-seizure drugs, female hormone replacement therapy and vitamin therapy) have been tried, however, such treatments either have no effect or their effect is no greater than what we would expect to see with placebo (sugar pill) treatment.

How long will the burning sensation last?

Again, we cannot say for sure. We know that for about half of the affected patients, the condition will resolve after a period of time, but no one can predict how long that will be for a particular individual. For the most part, this problem is a nuisance, and it is a frustrating situation for both patients and doctors.