



Geographic Tongue

Definition

Geographic tongue is a harmless (benign) oral condition that gives your tongue a map-like, or geographic, appearance. The distinct look of geographic tongue occurs when parts of your tongue are missing the layer of small bumps called papillae. This causes irregularly shaped smooth, red patches to form on parts of your tongue, like a rash.

Although geographic tongue may look alarming, it doesn't cause any health problems and isn't associated with infection or cancer. Geographic tongue is usually painless but can sometimes cause tongue discomfort and increased sensitivity to certain substances. Geographic tongue often heals in one area then moves (migrates) to a different part of your tongue. Geographic tongue is also known as *benign migratory glossitis*.

Symptoms

Signs and symptoms of geographic tongue include:

- Map-like, or geographic, appearance of your tongue
- Smooth, bright red patches of various shapes and sizes on the top surface of your tongue
- Tongue discomfort
- Soreness or a burning sensation that may worsen with hot, spicy or acidic foods

When you have geographic tongue, the only sign you may have is a change in your tongue's appearance. The patches of geographic tongue may be outlined by a raised white or cream-colored line or border. The affected patches on your tongue can change size, color or location within minutes or hours, which may cause you anxiety or fear but is otherwise harmless. Geographic tongue may come and go over time.

When to See Your Doctor

Geographic tongue is a minor – although sometimes uncomfortable – condition. If discomfort persists for more than 10 days, see your dentist to make sure you don't have a more serious medical condition.

Causes

Small bumps called papillae normally cover your tongue's upper surface. Geographic tongue results from the loss of papillae on some parts of your tongue. But why your tongue loses papillae isn't known. The condition tends to run in families, so genetics may play a role.

Complications

Complications and problems that geographic tongue may cause or be associated with include:

- Tongue discomfort
- Sensitivity to cigarette smoke, spicy foods, acidic foods and some toothpaste
- Anxiety about the appearance of your tongue

Geographic tongue is a benign condition. That is, it doesn't pose any threat to your health or cause any major health problems.

Tests and Diagnosis

Diagnosis of geographic tongue is generally simple. Diagnosis is based on your description of symptoms and an exam of your mouth and tongue. In some cases, your doctor or dentist may suggest having tests to check for other medical conditions.

Treatments and Drugs

Geographic tongue typically doesn't require any medical treatment. Although geographic tongue can sometimes cause tongue discomfort, it's otherwise a harmless condition. If you have ongoing or excessive pain, talk to your doctor. Your doctor may suggest or prescribe medications to help reduce your discomfort, including:

- Over-the-counter pain relievers
- Anti-inflammatory medications
- Mouth rinses with a topical anesthetic
- Topical corticosteroids
- Zinc supplements

However, none of these treatments has been proven to be effective for everyone. Geographic tongue usually gets better on its own within months, which may lead you to believe an unproven treatment has worked. Geographic tongue can last a year or more, though, and it may come back after a period of remission.

Lifestyle and Home Remedies

You can help reduce any discomfort from geographic tongue by avoiding or limiting these substances, which can aggravate your condition:

- Alcohol
- Tobacco products
- Hot or spicy foods
- Acidic beverages and foods, such as certain fruit
- Toothpaste that contains tartar-control additives, heavy flavoring or whitening agents
- Dried, salty nuts

Prevention

There is no known way to prevent geographic tongue.