



Oral Lichen Planus

Definition

Oral lichen planus is a chronic inflammatory condition of unknown origin affecting the lining of your mouth, usually resulting in characteristic lacy white patches. Oral lichen planus occurs most often on the inside of your cheeks but also can affect your gums, tongue, lips and other parts of your mouth. Oral lichen planus sometimes involves your throat or esophagus.

While oral lichen planus usually begins during midlife, it can occur at any age. An initial episode of oral lichen planus may last for weeks or months. Oral lichen planus is usually a chronic condition and can last for many years. Although there is no cure, oral lichen planus can be managed with medications and home remedies.

Symptoms

Oral lichen planus signs and symptoms may include one or more of the following:

- Small, pale raised areas or bumps that form a lacy network on your tongue, gums or inside your cheeks
- Shiny, red or white, slightly-raised patches on your tongue, gums or cheeks
- Red, open sores in your mouth
- Mouth pain
- Burning in your mouth
- Dry mouth
- A sense that your mouth feels rough
- Sore gums
- Sensitivity to hot or spicy foods
- A metallic taste or a blunted taste sensation
- Burning, swelling, bleeding and irritation with tooth brushing

Oral lichen planus usually causes only a limited lacy network of pale, shiny, red or white, slightly-raised areas or patches on the sides of your tongue or inside your cheeks. Less commonly, it may turn into a painful erosive lesion, or ulcer. Sometimes oral lichen planus causes no signs or symptoms other than the raised areas or patches. You may have periods when your oral lichen planus flares up, alternating with periods when you're symptom-free.

When you have oral lichen planus, you may also have the skin form, called lichen planus. You may notice lesions on the other parts of your body, including your skin, scalp, nails, and genitals.

Causes

The exact cause of oral lichen planus isn't known. Mounting research evidence suggests that oral lichen planus is an autoimmune condition that arises when your body's immune system triggers a chronic inflammatory process in your mucous membranes. It's thought that this process affects certain skin cells, including some of those in your mouth.

Risk Factors

While it's not known what causes oral lichen planus, factors that may increase your risk of the condition include:

- **Gender.** Women are more likely than men to have oral lichen planus.
- **Medications.** Certain medications, such as some of those used to treat arthritis, heart disease, high blood pressure and malaria may trigger oral lichen planus.
- **Allergies.** Oral lichen planus can result from an allergic reaction to food, food additives, fragrances, dyes, dental metals or other substances.
- **Medical conditions.** Certain medical conditions, including other immune disorders, are associated with oral lichen planus. These may include lichen planus of the skin, liver disease, graft-versus-host disease, primary sclerosing cholangitis, lupus erythematosus, primary biliary cirrhosis, Sjogren's syndrome, ulcerative colitis, alopecia areata, and myasthenia gravis.
- **Dental Issues.** Sharp edges on your teeth, dental restorations, ill-fitting dental prostheses, some periodontal surgical procedures, and oral habits such as lip and cheek chewing may increase the risk of oral lichen planus.
- **Betel quid.** Chewing betel quid – a plant and nut combination common in Southeast Asia – may increase your risk.
- **Psychological issues.** Stress, depression and anxiety often accompany oral lichen planus and may worsen existing cases.

Treatments and Drugs

There is no cure for oral lichen planus. Medical treatment focuses on controlling your pain, reducing lesions and prolonging the periods of time when you're symptom-free.

Mild Symptoms

The course of treatment you have for oral lichen planus is based on the severity of your symptoms and the underlying cause, if known. With mild symptoms, you may not need any treatment, other than home remedies. Still, you should have periodic exams to make sure your condition isn't worsening. If an underlying condition is causing your oral lichen planus, treatment for that may improve your symptoms.

More Bothersome Symptoms

If your symptoms are bothersome or you have erosions or ulcerations, treatment options for oral lichen planus include:

- **Corticosteroids.** High-potency corticosteroid gels or ointments applied to lesions in your mouth are the most effective medications for oral lichen planus. You may also need to take oral corticosteroid pills. Because these medications can cause candidiasis, or oral thrush, you may need medications for that, too. Lesions that

don't get better with topical treatments can be injected with corticosteroids. Talk to your doctor about possible risks associated with long-term corticosteroid use, such as adrenal suppression.

- **Medicated mouth rinses or sprays.** These can temporarily numb or soothe a painful mouth and may also decrease the size of oral lesions.
- **Immunosuppressant medications.** If your oral lichen planus doesn't get better with corticosteroids, medications that suppress your immune system may be an option. Because these medications can have serious side effects, and some have been linked to cancer, be sure you understand all of the pros and cons.

It can be difficult to bring oral lichen planus under control. You may need to try several different treatments to find one that's effective. Because oral lichen planus tends to be chronic, you may need treatment for months or even years.

Lifestyle and Home Remedies

In addition to regular medical and dental treatment, self-care measures may help improve your oral lichen planus symptoms. These include:

- **Practicing good oral hygiene.** Keep your mouth clean to reduce your symptoms and help prevent infection. Gently brush and floss your teeth daily.
- **Avoid alcohol and tobacco products.** Alcohol and tobacco may irritate your mouth. They also further increase your risk of oral cancer. If you use alcohol, do so in moderation. Don't smoke or use smokeless tobacco or any other tobacco product.
- **Adjust your diet.** Consider cutting out spicy or acidic foods if they seem to cause or worsen your symptoms.
- **Have regular oral examinations.** See your doctor every six to twelve months, or as scheduled, to have your condition monitored and to be screened for oral cancer.
- **Take note of your symptoms.** If you notice changes in your symptoms, such as new or worsening sores, contact your doctor right away.
- **Get appropriate mental health care.** Oral lichen planus has been linked to anxiety, stress and depression. If these are issues for you, talk to your doctor or see a mental health provider for treatment.

Prevention

There's no sure way to prevent oral lichen planus. Getting underlying medical conditions under control may help oral lichen planus from worsening. Also, avoiding alcohol and tobacco can help reduce your risk of oral cancer, which as been linked to oral lichen planus.