

Maxillofacial Unit

Lichen Planus

This leaflet has been designed to improve your understanding of any forthcoming treatment and contains answers to many of the commonly asked questions. If you have any other questions that the leaflet does not answer or would like further explanation please ask

What is lichen planus?

Lichen planus is an inflammatory and auto-immune condition that can affect the lining of the mouth and sometimes other areas of the body including skin, nails and genitals. The cause is not fully understood. It is common and affects up to 2% of the population. Lichen planus is most frequent in middle age and women are affected slightly more frequently than men. Although there is no known cure treatment can be given to make the symptoms better.

What causes lichen planus?

The cause of oral lichen planus is not known in most instances but it is likely to have something to do with the body's immune system. In a minority of cases, lesions which resemble those of lichen planus (oral lichenoid lesions) can be caused by some medicines e.g. some drugs prescribed for high blood pressure and diabetes, or by dental filling materials e.g. dental amalgam. It can be very difficult to distinguish oral lichenoid lesions from oral lichen planus.

What lichen planus is not!

- It is not cancer.
- It is not inherited, ie passed on from your parents.
- It is not contagious, ie you cannot "catch it" from someone who has it or give it to somebody else.

What are the symptoms of oral lichen planus?

The symptoms of oral lichen planus may include a burning or stinging discomfort in the mouth when eating or drinking. Mild cases may be symptom-free. Spicy foods, citrus fruits and alcohol can be particularly troublesome. If your gums are affected, they may become tender and tooth-brushing can be uncomfortable. Ulcers (often called erosions) may occur and these are especially painful.

What does it look like?

In the mouth lichen planus is usually found on the inside of the cheeks and on the side of the tongue although it can also affect the gums and roof of the mouth. Usually lichen planus has a lace-like pattern of streaky white patches that occasionally can be thickened. Often the patches are symmetrical, ie. affect the same site on different sides of the mouth. Sometimes there can be redness, ulcers or rarely blistering as well as or instead of the white patches. If so, you may find it painful to eat hot or spicy foods.

How is lichen planus diagnosed?

The appearance of lichen planus is usually typical and can be diagnosed by an experienced doctor just looking inside your mouth. However, it is often necessary to take a small sample (biopsy) from an affected area inside the mouth for microscopic examination. A local anaesthetic injection to 'numb' the biopsy site is necessary for this procedure.

Can oral lichen planus be cured?

In most cases oral lichen planus cannot be cured but may go away spontaneously. It tends to last longer than lichen planus of the skin and may persist for a number of years. However, there are treatments to dampen down the symptoms. In rare cases where the lesions are thought to be caused by medicines or dental filling materials (oral lichenoid lesions), changing these may result in an improvement or resolution. These changes should only be undertaken with specialist advice and under medical supervision.

How is lichen planus treated?

If lichen planus is not causing you any problems, it does not require treatment although you will need monitoring by your primary dentist. If lichen planus is causing you problems such as soreness, treatments can be given to lessen the symptoms. Usually these are given directly on to the affected areas (topically) rather than having to take tablets to swallow.

Is there anything else I can do?

- Avoid spicy, acidic or salty foods if these make your mouth sore.
- Keep your teeth clean by using a soft brush and small interdental brushes.
- Choose a toothpaste with a mild flavour and free from the foaming agent, sodium lauryl sulphate (SLS). An example is Kingfisher toothpaste with fluoride (mint), this is a mild toothpaste and is often comfortable for patients with Oral Lichen Planus.
- You may find it helpful to keep a diary and look for trigger events if you have a flare-up of symptoms. These flare-ups may be related to particular foods, stress or local trauma.
- In view of the small risk of cancerous change in oral lichen planus, it is important that you ensure that your mouth is checked on a regular basis by a dentist or oral specialist, so that any early changes can be spotted.
- It is advisable to stop smoking and reduce your alcohol intake to recommended limits (currently 14 units a week for both men and women) as these are the main risk factors for mouth cancer.

Will I always have lichen planus?

This is difficult to say. Some people suffer for only a few months before their symptoms settle down. Others may suffer for several years. Once the symptoms disappear they may or may not return at a later date.

This leaflet is specific to the practice of Oral and Maxillo-Facial Surgery in the United Kingdom and is in addition to the generic guidance given in the GMC publications of Good Medical and Surgical Practice 2001 & 2002.

If you have any comments about this leaflet or the service you have received you can contact :

Maxillofacial Unit
Huddersfield Royal Infirmary
Telephone (01484) 355737

www.cht.nhs.uk

If you would like this information in another format or language contact the above.

Potřebujete-li tyto informace v jiném formátu nebo jazyce, obraťte se prosím na výše uvedené oddělení

Jeżeli są Państwo zainteresowani otrzymaniem tych informacji w innym formacie lub wersji językowej, prosimy skontaktować się z nami, korzystając z ww. danych kontaktowych

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