

Managing geographic tongue

Oral & Maxillofacial Surgery

Information for Patients

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What is geographic tongue?

Geographic tongue is a common (but not serious) condition, that affects the tongue. The term geographic, is used as it looks like a map. The condition occurs in around 3% to 10% of the population, and affects females 2 times as often. It can be found in all age groups, but it is mostly seen in adults.

The lining in your mouth replaces (sheds) itself in the same way your skin does. With geographic tongue, it is thought some areas of the tongue replaces itself too soon. This leaves a red patch (area). The areas around it may take much longer to replace (shed), making it look whiter at the edges of the red patch. There may also be cracks or splits on the tongue. You will notice over a few weeks to months that the positions of the patches change and the appearance of the map is altered.

Geographic tongue is not contagious so you cannot pass it on to others. In most cases, geographic tongue does not have any symptoms, but your tongue may become more prone to developing thrush (which is common in the mouth), making it more inflamed (red) and sore.

You may also notice your tongue has become more sensitive to spicy, citrus or acidic foods.

What causes it?

The cause of geographic tongue is not known, and it is seen just as a variation (form) of what is considered normal, rather than a disease or infection. It is also often linked with psoriasis, asthma, eczema and contact skin allergies.

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How is it diagnosed?

Geographic tongue is diagnosed by taking the history of the red patches and/or any symptoms. Your mouth will then be examined. Tell the doctor if you have any skin changes elsewhere.

Sometimes, the patches are not present when you are seen and we **may** need to see you again. It may be helpful to bring in a photograph taken on your mobile phone. There is often no need to carry out a biopsy to confirm the diagnosis of geographic tongue. Sometimes a biopsy may be suggested if the history and appearance is not typical of geographic tongue or if the patient is concerned and would like a definite diagnosis for reassurance.

Blood tests are sometimes necessary to rule out anaemia or vitamin deficiencies which can also cause a burning sensation similar to geographic tongue.

Treatment

There is no cure for geographic tongue.

- Good oral hygiene is encouraged. Only use mild toothpaste without sodium laurel sulphate (SLS) and mouthwashes to avoid irritation.
- If you do develop symptoms of thrush, a common problem with geographic tongue, then we can prescribe anti-fungal medication or it can be provided by your dentist or doctor.
- You can buy over the counter medications from your local pharmacist, which can be used to numb the sore areas giving short term relief. They should **not** be used long-term as they may also be an irritant.
- **Try** to avoid foods that cause irritation, or make symptoms worse. You may think about keeping a food diary, which may help to pinpoint the foods that make **your** symptoms worse.

Contact details

Maxillofacial Unit

Reception 0116 258 5301 8:30am to 5pm

Nurses Station 0116 2585671 8:30 am to 5pm

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Aby uzyskać informacje w innym języku, proszę zadzwonić pod podany niżej numer telefonu

Previous reference:

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