

Burning mouth syndrome (BMS)

Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery

Information for Patients

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What is burning mouth syndrome (BMS)?

BMS is a common condition. It feels like a burning pain or hot scalding sensation, causing discomfort. It usually affects the tongue or lips, but other parts of the skin lining inside the mouth can also feel uncomfortable. The mouth usually looks normal.

Common symptoms of BMS

- Burning hot or scalding sensation, which can come and go or be continuous.
- Dryness, unpleasant taste.
- Tingling or numbness.

The symptoms may get worse when speaking, eating hot and spicy foods, or when stressed. The symptoms may get better by avoiding eating certain foods, resting or after sleep, or when you are doing other activities to distract you.

BMS is more common in women, but can also happen in men. It often happens around the time of the menopause.

What causes BMS?

The cause of BMS is unknown. There are a number of factors may contribute to it, including:

- Thrush or other infections in the mouth.
- Anxiety, stress or depression.
- Dentures that do not fit properly.
- Hormonal changes around menopause.
- Dry mouth.
- Allergic reactions to medications.
- Blood and vitamin deficiencies.

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How is BMS diagnosed?

BMS is diagnosed by checking your medical history and a full mouth examination to rule out possible underlying causes, e.g. thrush. You will usually have a blood test to rule out blood and vitamin deficiencies and a mouth swab taken to check for thrush.

Is there a treatment for BMS?

There is no cure for BMS and it is important to accept that it may take a number of years to disappear, especially if stress is one of the possible causes for you. Symptoms may improve with:

- Reassurance that there is no serious underlying disease.
- Relaxation, yoga, meditation or cognitive behaviour therapy.
- Low dose antidepressants (just as they can be helpful for pain control, they have also been found to decrease sensitivity in the mouth).
- Keeping the mouth moist and clean as BMS is worse with dryness.
- Difflam mouthwash can be bought over the counter in Pharmacies or major supermarkets to numb the mouth in severe cases (although this can irritate the mouth for some people).
- Your GP may consider hormone therapy, however this has not been proven to improve symptoms.

What if it does not improve?

Around half of all people with BMS find it improves or disappears eventually. We cannot cure BMS but can often reduce symptoms. Learning to live with the symptoms and keeping in mind that there is no underlying disease is often the best way to manage this problem.

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