Lichen planus of the mouth

This information is for patients with lichen planus of the mouth. If you have any other questions that the leaflet does not answer or would like further explanation please ask your surgeon.

What is lichen planus?

Lichen planus is an inflammatory condition that can affect the lining of the mouth as well as the skin. The cause is not fully understood. It is common and affects up to 1 in 50 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.

- It is not cancer.
- It is not inherited (passed on from your parents).
- It is not contagious - you cannot ‘catch it’ from someone who has it or give it to somebody else.
- It is not related to food although some foods you eat can make the patches of lichen planus sore.

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. 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.
- The patches are often symmetrical, which means that they affect the same site on different sides of the mouth.
- Lichen planus may sometimes be associated with red patches or sores.

How is lichen planus diagnosed?

The appearance of lichen planus is usually typical and can be diagnosed by an experienced doctor just by looking inside your mouth. The diagnosis sometimes needs confirmation with a biopsy (removal of a small amount of tissue which can then be looked at closely under a microscope).
How is lichen planus treated?

If lichen planus is not causing you any problems it does not require treatment although we may keep you under review. If lichen planus is causing you problems such as soreness, treatments can be given to lessen the symptoms. These are usually given directly on to the affected areas (topically) rather than having to take tablets.

Is there anything else I can do?

- 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.
- You may find it useful to change to a milder form of toothpaste. It is important to maintain good hygiene in the mouth.
- Some lichen planus can be related to amalgam (metal fillings). If this is the case it may be suggested that a filling is replaced if adjacent to the lichen planus.

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.

Adapted from:

British Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons.
http://www.baoms.org.uk/

Privacy & Dignity

Same sex bays and bathrooms are offered in all wards except critical care and theatre recovery areas where the use of high-tech equipment and/or specialist one to one care is required.
We are now a smoke-free site: smoking will not be allowed anywhere on the hospital site.
For advice and support in quitting, contact your GP or the free NHS stop smoking helpline on 0800 169 0 169.

Other formats:
If you would like this information in another language, large print or audio, please ask the department where you are being treated, to contact the patient information team: patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk.

Please note: We do not currently hold many leaflets in other languages; written translation requests are funded and agreed by the department who has authored the leaflet.

Document history
Authors Oral and Maxillofacial department
Department Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 0QQ www.cuh.org.uk
Contact number 01223 216635
Publish/Review date February 2016 / February 2020 (no changes)
File name Lichen_planus_v5.doc
Version number/Ref 5/PIN0465/1117