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Glossitis

Glossitis is a problem in which the tongue is swollen and inflamed. This often makes the surface of the tongue appear smooth. Geographic tongue is a type of glossitis.

Causes

Glossitis is often a symptom of other conditions, such as:

- Allergic reactions to oral care products, foods, or medicines
- Dry mouth due to Sjögren syndrome
- Infection from bacteria, yeast or viruses (including oral herpes)
- Injury (such as from burns, rough teeth, or bad-fitting dentures)
- Skin conditions that affect the mouth
- Irritants such as tobacco, alcohol, hot foods, spices, or other irritants
- Hormonal factors
- Certain vitamin deficiencies

At times, glossitis may be passed down in families.

Symptoms

Symptoms of glossitis may come on quickly or develop over time. They include:

- Problems chewing, swallowing, or speaking
- Smooth surface of the tongue
- Sore, tender, or swollen tongue
- Pale or bright red color to the tongue

Rare symptoms or problems include:

- Blocked airway
- Problems speaking, chewing, or swallowing

Exams and Tests

Your dentist or health care provider will do an exam to look for:

- Finger-like bumps on the surface of the tongue (called papillae) that may be missing
- Swollen tongue (or patches of swelling)

The provider may ask questions about your health history and lifestyle to help discover the cause of tongue inflammation.

You may need blood tests to rule out other medical problems.

Treatment

The goal of treatment is to reduce swelling and soreness. Most people do not need to go to the hospital unless the tongue is very swollen. Treatment may include:

- Good oral care. Brush your teeth thoroughly at least twice a day and floss at least once a day.
- Antibiotics or other medicines to treat infection.
- Diet changes and supplements to treat nutrition problems.
- Avoiding irritants (such as hot or spicy foods, alcohol, and tobacco) to ease discomfort.

Outlook (Prognosis)

Glossitis goes away if the cause of problem is removed or treated.

When to Contact a Medical Professional

Contact your provider if:

- Symptoms of glossitis last longer than 10 days.
- Tongue swelling is very bad.
- Breathing, speaking, chewing, or swallowing causes problems.

Get emergency care right away if tongue swelling blocks the airway.

Prevention

Good oral care (thorough tooth brushing and flossing and regular dental checkups) may help prevent glossitis.

Alternative Names

Tongue inflammation; Tongue infection; Smooth tongue; Glossodynia; Burning tongue syndrome

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