

# Diseases of the Mouth

Hugh Silk, MD, MPH

## KEYWORDS

• Oral • Stomatitis • Candidiasis • Caries • Oral cancers • Leukoplakia

## KEY POINTS

- The most common infection and disease of the mouth is caries. Caries is a chronic, transmissible disease caused by bacteria using sugar to create an acidic environment that erodes the teeth.
- Candidiasis is an infection of the oral mucosa by the *Candida* species. The most prominent candida infection in humans is *Candida albicans*.
- Approximately 50% of children will have some form of gingivitis; for adults, it is as much as 90% when all types and causes are included. Gingivitis is very prevalent during pregnancy due to hormonal changes.
- Benign bony protuberances arise from the cortical plate and consist of lamellar bone. They are more common in the hard palate of the mouth but can also occur in the floor of the mouth. They are likely congenital but do not develop until adulthood.
- Clinicians should pay close attention to a history of nonhealing ulcer or mass in the mouth or on the lip, or any area that bleeds easily or has unexplained pain. Other concerning symptoms for oral cancer may include dysphagia/odynophagia, chronic sore throat or hoarseness, or unexplained ear pain.

## INTRODUCTION

The mouth is the gateway to the body.<sup>1</sup> Disease in the mouth can cause systemic diseases (eg, bacterial endocarditis), and systemic disease can also lead to complications in the mouth (eg, Behcet disease). Patients often present first to their primary care provider with oral symptoms. Medical clinicians often defer diseases of the mouth to dental professionals, oral surgeons, and otolaryngologists; however, medical professionals should be comfortable with the diagnosis and initial management of many common diseases of the oral cavity. This article discusses 3 major categories of disease within the mouth (excluding the tongue and salivary glands):

1. Mouth infections (caries and complications, candidiasis)
2. Inflammatory conditions (gingivitis, periodontitis, and stomatitis)
3. Common benign and malignant lesions (bony tori, mucocele, lichen planus, leukoplakia, cancer).

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Department of Family Medicine and Community Health, University of Massachusetts Medical School, Worcester, MA, USA

E-mail address: [hugh.silk@umassmed.edu](mailto:hugh.silk@umassmed.edu)

Prim Care Clin Office Pract 41 (2014) 75–90

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pop.2013.10.011>

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## INFECTIONS OF THE MOUTH

### Caries

#### Description

The most common infection and disease of the mouth is caries. Caries is a chronic, transmissible disease caused by bacteria using sugar to create an acidic environment that erodes the teeth. Over time this process leads to holes (cavities) in the tooth's structure. The predominant bacterium involved is *Streptococcus mutans*, although the disease may have more to do with a disruption of a complex biofilm on the teeth than the overpopulation of one species. Fluoride and saliva are protective factors.<sup>2</sup>

#### Risk factors

Risks for caries are multifactorial, including physical and socioeconomic factors. See [Box 1](#).

#### Prevalence

Nearly 24% of adults aged 20 to 64 have untreated dental caries and 84% have had a dental restoration.<sup>3</sup> The western developed countries tend to have more caries compared with lesser developed countries and this is thought to be second to the predominance of concentrated refined sweets in many countries.

#### Clinical implications

Untreated caries can lead to local and systemic infections. A cavity invades the pulp and root of the tooth, which includes the nerves and blood supply. This local infection can spread through surrounding gingival tissue, form an abscess, penetrate other layers of anatomy such as the cheek or airway, and ultimately infect the meninges or bloodstream. At a minimum, untreated cavities can cause pain and at worst has caused death through meningitis.

#### Diagnostic options and dilemmas

Routine screening examinations by medical and dental professionals can help identify caries early. Most professional organizations recommend an examination every 6 months. Mouth radiographs done periodically (common recommendation is every 2 years) can also help diagnose disease in the early stages.

#### Box 1

##### Risk factors for caries in adults

- Previous caries
- High oral bacterial counts (mainly *S mutans*)
- Inadequate oral hygiene (brushing with fluoridated toothpaste and flossing)
- Inadequate exposure to fluoride
- Frequent consumption of sugary foods, snacks, and drinks
- Low socioeconomic status
- Physical or mental disabilities (making it difficult to brush/floss)
- Existing appliances (trapping food)
- Decreased salivary flow (due to medications or disease states)
- Exposed roots (in elderly due to lack of enamel on roots)

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