Calming the Calamity of Canker Sores

Q. I get canker sores regularly. Can changing my diet help prevent them?

A. It might. Several studies have linked canker sores (also known as aphthous ulcers) to low levels of several vitamins and minerals, including vitamin A, C, E, thiamin, calcium and iron. But by no means is everyone who gets them deficient in nutrients. The exact cause of most canker sores remains a mystery.

Canker Versus Cold. Don’t confuse canker sores with cold sores, which are caused by the Herpes simplex type 1 virus. While cold sores appear on the outer lip or even under the nose, canker sores form only inside the mouth.

A canker sore begins as a red spot that tingles or burns before it turns white and painful. Most canker sores heal on their own within a week or two, but can severely limit eating during that time.

Canker Conditions. Experts estimate recurrent canker sores affect 20% to 30% of the population, with a tendency to run in families. Triggers that can bring them on in susceptible people include fatigue, stress and injury, such as biting the inside of your mouth or ill-fitting dentures, as well as irritation from sodium lauryl sulfate, a common ingredient in toothpaste, and, possibly, nutrient insufficiencies.

Canker Relief. Try these remedies to help deal with the discomfort or to lessen the likelihood of frequent outbreaks:

• Rinse your mouth with a solution of ½ teaspoon of salt dissolved in eight ounces of warm water.
• Opt for a toothpaste without sodium lauryl sulfate (check ingredient list).
• Try an over-the-counter numbing agent like Anbesol or Orabase.
• Avoid spicy or acid foods that might irritate the sore.
• Squeeze a vitamin E capsule onto a cotton swab and apply to the sore for 10 minutes, as needed for pain.
• Take vitamin C as a preventive; try 250 milligrams twice daily.

EN’s Bottom Line. The best advice to keep canker sores at bay is to get enough rest and avoid stress. It may also help to eat a balanced diet, take a multivitamin/mineral supplement and chew carefully. If you get sores often or they don’t go away within two weeks, see your dentist.

Weight Gain, Heart Disease: Is High-Fructose Corn Syrup to Blame?

Q. I’ve heard that high-fructose corn syrup might make me fat or even trigger some diseases. Should I avoid it?

A. Avoiding it totally might be difficult, but it is a good idea to limit foods sweetened with high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS), though not necessarily because they uniquely contribute to overweight or disease.

HFCS is made by treating cornstarch with enzymes. “High-fructose” is actually a misnomer, because most of the HFCS used today has about the same amount of fructose (45% to 55%) as table sugar. One type of HFCS contains about 90% fructose and is used in low-calorie foods; less is needed because it’s super sweet.

HFCS Everywhere...But Not a Bite to Eat. In the U.S., it’s hard to find sweetened foods that don’t contain HFCS. It’s ubiquitous in soft drinks, canned fruits, desserts, yogurts, cereals, salad dressings, fruit drinks, ice cream, jams and peanut butter. Even foods that don’t taste sweet, like canned soups and spaghetti sauce, often contain HFCS. In fact, experts estimate that Americans consume 200 calories a day, on average, from HFCS alone.

Does HFCS Make You Fat? Some researchers have suggested that HFCS is a possible contributor to obesity. But the evidence is limited to a dramatic rise in obesity occurring parallel to an equally dramatic increase in HFCS intake.

There’s no denying that the empty calories HFCS provides can make weight loss an uphill battle, but there’s no evidence it has a unique effect on weight gain. A study last year from the University of Rhode Island found no difference between HFCS and table sugar in their effects on insulin levels and blood levels of leptin and ghrelin, two hormones that help regulate calorie intake.

Does HFCS Affect Your Heart? Some research has suggested that a diet high in fructose raises triglycerides, especially in men, increasing the risk of heart disease. The research is not definitive. But whether that fructose comes from table sugar or HFCS may not matter.

Decaf That’s Often Not

Q. Is decaf coffee really caffeine-free?

A. No. A recent analysis from the University of Florida found that “decaf” from several local and franchised coffee purveyors (e.g., Starbucks’, Dunkin’ Donuts, The Big Bean, Krispy Kreme, McDonald’s) contained anywhere from 3 to almost 16 milligrams per 16-ounce serving (”grand” in Starbucks-speak) or per single espresso shot.

While that’s much less than what’s in a cup of regular joe—about 85 milligrams per cup of brew—it adds up. For example, a decaf latte from Starbucks, which contains two shots of decaf espresso, delivers as much caffeine as a can of cola (35 to 45 milligrams). The only decaf found to be truly caffeine-free? Instant decaffeinated Folgers Coffee Crystals.

EN’s Bottom Line. Whether caffeine aggravates heart disease or high blood pressure is hotly debated. But if you are particularly sensitive to caffeine’s stimulant effects or fear it might interact with your medications, you may want to scale back even on the decaf. Try a coffee substitute like Postum, made from cereal grains, which are caffeine-free.

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