
Coated Tongue & Hairy Tongue

What are the aims of this leaflet?

This leaflet has been written to help you understand more about Coated tongue and Hairy tongue. It tells you what these are, what causes them and what can be done to manage these two conditions.

What is Coated Tongue?

Coated tongue occurs when a layer of debris builds up on the surface of the tongue producing a visible coating. This is usually white but may be yellow or brown in colour.

What is Hairy Tongue?

Hairy tongue occurs when the small projections, known as papillae, on the top surface of the tongue become longer giving it a hairy appearance.

What causes Coated Tongue and Hairy Tongue?

All tongues are coated in a mixture of mucus, cells from the lining of the mouth, harmless bacteria and other debris. In most healthy people, this is constantly removed by the tongue's movement and the flow of saliva.

If this coating builds up and thickens, it can make the tongue appear more coated. Debris from foods/ drinks, cigarette smoke, yeasts and bacteria then collect in this coating which can make the tongue appear discoloured.

The cause of Hairy tongue is unknown. Everyone's tongue is covered in tiny 'papillae'; when these become longer, they can look like hairs. This may happen in response to irritation by foods or debris on the tongue. Patients with a coated or hairy tongue may occasionally report bad breath, also known as halitosis.

Changes and conditions which predispose to the development of a coated or hairy tongue include:

- A dry mouth, because of a reduction in the flow of saliva. Dry mouth may be due to a number of reasons, such as medication, smoking, diabetes or radiation treatment to the head and neck.
- Less or restricted movement of the tongue
- Long periods of not eating as a result of illness or fasting
- Poor dental hygiene
- Eating less abrasive foods
- Tobacco use
- Drinking excessive amount of tea/ coffee
- Certain medications such as iron salts, chlorhexidine and bismuth
- Over scraping or overbrushing the tongue can make the papillae become longer and therefore more obvious.
- In some cases, these conditions appear for no obvious reason.

What do they look like?

Coated tongue typically appears as a white, cream, brown or dark layer on the top surface of the tongue. Hairy tongue appears as small 'hair-like' projections coming from the top surface of the tongue, particularly at the back, which can be yellow, dark brown or black in colour.

How are they diagnosed?

Coated tongue and Hairy tongue are diagnosed after asking you about your tongue and examining your mouth. Occasionally, with a hairy tongue, patients report a tickling sensation on the back of their tongue or throat when swallowing. Your mouth and tongue are carefully examined to check that there are no signs of thrush (oral candidiasis) or any other abnormalities. No special tests are usually required to make this diagnosis.

Are they serious conditions?

Coated tongue and Hairy Tongue are entirely harmless conditions and are not linked with anything serious, such as mouth cancer. However, they can cause anxiety for patients, particularly if they have concerns that this indicates a 'dirty' mouth or an infection on their tongue. This is not the case.

How can they be managed?

It is often difficult to remove the coating or projections from the tongue. The following may help to eliminate or reduce these conditions:

- Stopping smoking has many benefits to your health and may help to reduce any coating on the tongue.
- Eating a diet containing rougher foods such as raw fruits and vegetables
- Cut a thin slice of pineapple into eight pieces, suck a piece on the back of the tongue for a minute then slowly chew it, repeating for the rest of the pieces. Do this twice a day for a week. (Rhubarb can be used instead).
- Sucking on a dry peach stone may be helpful for a Hairy tongue – **WARNING, take care not to swallow or inhale the stone.**
- Chewing sugar-free gum to stimulate salivary flow
- Cleaning your tongue with either a toothbrush or a tongue scraper as part of your daily oral hygiene routine. (Use a separate toothbrush for cleaning your teeth). Over cleaning your tongue with a scraper can make the problem worse.
- Keeping well hydrated and drink plenty of water.
- Some mouthwashes (e.g. hydrogen peroxide, bicarbonate of soda or ascorbic acid) have a 'fizzing' action which can help remove debris from the tongue. Please note some mouthwashes (e.g. chlorhexidine) can cause staining or irritation of the tongue and you may wish to avoid these.



This leaflet has been prepared by the British and Irish Society for Oral Medicine (BISOM). It is reviewed periodically to reflect relevant advances and improved understanding. Not all the information will be relevant to all patients. For individual advice please see your Oral Medicine specialist. The BISOM is not responsible for information on web sites where links are provided.

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