



Coated/Hairy Tongue

What is coated/hairy tongue?

Coated/hairy tongue (also known as “coated tongue”) is a benign condition of the top (or dorsum) of the tongue caused by lengthening of the “hairs” or “papillae” on the tongue that is made up of a material called keratin. Coated/hairy tongue develops when the keratin accumulates more than normal, leading to a coating or thickening of the tongue dorsum. In many cases, the coating appears white, although this may become stained black or brown by tobacco and food. Bacteria that normally live on the tongue also produce pigments that are harmless but can cause your tongue to look brown, yellow, black (“black coated/hairy tongue”) or even greenish. Although their names are similar, it is important not to mistake the term “hairy tongue” with “hairy leukoplakia” which is a completely unrelated condition that affects the sides of the tongue.

For the majority of patients, coated/hairy tongue is entirely asymptomatic, although it may be a cosmetic concern. In very rare cases, patients may report that the long papillae cause an irritating or gagging sensation; some patients also describe an unpleasant, stale or abnormal taste in their mouths, and many patients will feel that their mouths feel dry.

What causes coated/hairy tongue?

There are two important factors that cause this condition and they are often inter-connected. The first is dehydration which can result in your saliva being stickier and less watery, so that the keratin on the tongue papillae sticks together longer than they should rather than shedding. This is especially common in patients who have been ill and have been on certain medications (such as antibiotics or chemotherapy). Patients who are well and who smoke or use strong, alcohol-containing or dehydrating mouth rinses may also develop oral dryness and hairy/coated tongue. The second factor is lack of activities that normally help the papillae to shed such as eating a soft diet or not eating much at all. Both these factors are often present in patients who have been ill and have temporarily lost their appetite, or have been unable to eat at all. Coated/hairy tongue is NOT infectious in nature and you cannot spread it to family members or friends.

How do we know it is coated/hairy tongue?

Your doctor can usually make the diagnosis of coated/hairy tongue simply based on your tongue's appearance. Candidiasis (“thrush”) is a yeast infection that may look similar to coated/hairy tongue but is almost always sensitive or painful, and it will also usually affect other parts of the mouth in addition to the top of the tongue. Your doctor may perform a laboratory test to rule this out by scraping your tongue to look for yeasts. A positive culture alone is not an indication that you have a yeast infection since about one-quarter of the population have inactive yeast in their mouths (“carriers”). In very rare cases, a biopsy may be necessary for a definitive diagnosis.

How do we treat coated/hairy tongue?

Coated/hairy tongue will usually go away once the underlying contributing factors have been eliminated or corrected or when you fully recover from your illness. In most cases, drinking more water, cutting back on caffeinated beverages, stopping the use of dehydrating mouth rinses and returning to a normal balanced diet is all that is necessary. Gentle brushing of the tongue may encourage the top layers of dead cells and keratin to come off and improve the tongue's appearance.

What can I expect?

Coated/hairy tongue is a benign condition that may recur over time depending on the underlying contributing factors.

