Hot sauce cools a burning mouth

Q. I have had a burning feeling in my mouth for over a year and I feel like I’ve tried about everything to help calm the symptoms. I am 48, menopausal, and have hypothyroidism, high blood pressure (well controlled), depression and acid reflux (also under control). I’ve been tested for a number of different conditions (thrush, fungus, Sjogren’s) and tried various remedies (changing toothpaste, mouthwash, vitamin B supplements, Alpha Lipoic - which caused a reaction).

Your description certainly sounds like you may have developed burning mouth syndrome. Burning mouth syndrome is a fairly common but poorly-understood condition that most frequently affects post-menopausal females.

People affected by it experience abnormal sensations of the mouth (burning sensation of the tongue) as well as alterations in taste and mouth texture.

We don’t know what causes the disorder, but most of the evidence suggests that this is a minor (but annoying) problem with certain nerves (called sensory nerves) that supply information from the oral tissues, especially the tongue, roof of the mouth and lips, to the brain.

This “misinformation” includes telling the brain that the mouth (especially the tongue) feels scalded (burning sensation), that bad tastes are present, or that the texture of the mouth is wrong (usually a “dry” feeling).

In this condition, the nerves of the mouth may become hyper-irritable, and even normal, barely-notable sensations (like the tongue rubbing against the teeth) may seem painful or uncomfortable.

Diagnosis of this condition can sometimes pose a problem because despite the presence of symptoms, when the mouth is examined, everything appears normal.

This causes a great deal of confusion for the doctor who is not familiar with this condition. The best person to evaluate this problem would be an oral and maxillofacial pathologist.

There is no medically proven treatment for this condition, and none of the so-called “cures” for burning mouth have been shown to be any better than placebo (“sugar pill”). However, for about half of the people who get this problem, it goes away by itself after a period of time, although the amount of time varies from person to person and is unpredictable.

If you cannot take alpha lipoic acid, the other thing that I recommend for my patients with burning mouth syndrome is a modified form of capsaicin therapy.

Capsaicin, the “hot” in hot peppers, has been shown in laboratory animals to reduce the number of nerves close to the skin that carry pain (pain fibers). The drug form of capsaicin therapy (brand name Zostrix) has been used to treat people with severe chronic pain of the skin in conditions such as shingles (recurrent varicella zoster virus infection).
Feeling saucy?

Another solution is any hot pepper sauce (I usually suggest a red chili pepper sauce since they are very common in the United States). Dilute three to five drops of hot sauce in a teaspoon of water. Swish this mixture in the mouth for 45 seconds and spit it out.

Reduce the type of hot sauce. If hardly noticeable, you can increase the amount of hot sauce relative to the water. Use after meals and right before going to bed.

Since the dose is quite mild (relatively), changes in the sensations within the mouth will be slow. Many patients indicate that it takes 10-14 days before they feel improvement in their symptoms. You can continue to use this regimen as needed.

Hot sauce is not a cure but often gives a sense of control back to patients who, like yourself, have not previously been able to improve their symptoms. It also has the advantages of being inexpensive, having no drug interactions and virtually no other complication besides a transient "hot" feeling inside the mouth.

Tags: burning mouth syndrome, Carl M. Allen, dental, fungus, John R. Kalmar, Ohio State University, Sjorgens, thursh