What causes white patches in the mouth and tongue?

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Q. Is a white tongue a common issue with smoking? What else can cause white tongue?

A. There are a number of common manifestations of smoking and changes that occur to the mouth and tongue. Some of these changes may lead to oral cancer. The actual temperature and drying effects of tobacco smoke alter the consistency of tissue in the mouth. This happens frequently with the practice of reverse smoking where the lit end is placed in the mouth and smoked. The effect of reverse smoking results in white patches or "callouses" caused by increased production of keratin, a primary protein found in hair and nails. The drying effect has been associated with a white or translucent covering or film on mouth tissues.

But alcohol also damages the mouth. The white covering you are concerned about is related to the drying effects of alcohol. And there are other changes that alcohol causes in the mouth that may ultimately lead to oral cancer.

Other causes of white tongue

The white-tongue problem can be related to other less-threatening factors such as poor oral hygiene, overgrowth of tissue covering the tongue, and certain foods.

Overgrowth of tissue covering the tongue and bad breath are commonly associated with white tongue. This happens when the covering on the tongue overgrows too long and increases the chance for food debris, bacteria, yeasts, and dead tissue to collect, resulting in bad fetid breath and a "white" appearance. Brushing the tongue with a toothbrush has been shown to decrease the incidence of bad breath.

In some cultures, certain foods such as habanero and jalapeño peppers are associated with the development of white tongue in response to the chemicals in the peppers.

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