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Geographic tongue

Geographic tongue is a map-like appearance of your tongue due to irregular patches on its surface.

Causes

The specific cause of geographic tongue is unknown, although vitamin B deficiency may be involved. Other causes may include irritation from hot or spicy foods, or alcohol. The condition appears to be less common in smokers.

The pattern on the surface of the tongue may change very rapidly. This pattern change occurs when there is a loss of the tiny, finger-like projections, called papillae, on the tongue's surface. This makes areas of the tongue flat. These areas are said to be "denuded." Denuded areas may persist for more than a month.

Symptoms

- Map-like appearance to the surface of the tongue
- Patches that move from day to day
- Smooth, red patches and sores (lesions) on the tongue
- Soreness and burning pain (in some cases)

Exams and Tests

Your doctor will usually diagnose this condition by examining your tongue. Tests are usually not needed.

Treatment

No treatment is needed, but antihistamine gel or steroid mouth rinses may help with discomfort.

Outlook (Prognosis)

Geographic tongue is a harmless condition, but it can be persistent and uncomfortable.

When to Contact a Medical Professional

Call your doctor if the symptoms last longer than 10 days. Seek immediate medical help if:

- Breathing trouble occurs
- The tongue is severely swollen
- There are problems with speaking, chewing, or swallowing

Prevention

Avoid irritating your tongue with hot or spicy food or alcohol if you are prone to this condition.

Alternative Names

Patches on the tongue; Tongue - patchy; Benign migratory glossitis; Glossitis - benign migratory

References

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