A Sore Spot

Mouth sores—they can be painful and irritating when you eat certain foods, when you bump them with your tongue or teeth, or even when you try to smile. They can be caused by ill-fitting dentures, braces, the sharp edge of a broken tooth, bacteria, a fungal or viral infection, or they can be a symptom of a disease or disorder.

What are mouth sores?
Mouth sores are swollen spots or sores in your mouth, on your lips, on your tongue, or on the skin surrounding your mouth. There are several types of mouth sores, including:

Canker sores. Canker sores are small, white areas of swelling or soreness that are surrounded by redness. Canker sores are not contagious. The cause of canker sores is uncertain, but some research suggests that immune system deficiencies, bacteria, or viruses might be the culprits. Smoking, stress, trauma, allergies, certain types of foods (chocolate, caffeine, or acidic foods), or vitamin deficiencies also may make you more susceptible to canker sores. Canker sores usually heal within one week, but they can recur. And, while there is no cure for cold sores, non-prescription topical anesthetics for temporary pain relief are available. Your dentist or physician also might prescribe an antiviral drug to reduce the infection.

Oral cancer. Oral cancer often starts as a tiny white or red spot or sore. Sometimes oral cancer presents itself as a sore that bleeds easily or does not heal. Or, it can be a lump or a thick or rough spot. It can affect any area of the mouth, including the lips, gums, tongue, and hard or soft palate. If you have pain, tenderness, or numbness anywhere in the mouth or on the lips that does not go away after a week, talk to your dentist. Oral cancer most often affects people who use tobacco. If you use tobacco, talk to your dentist or physician about tobacco cessation treatment plans. Also, your dentist can check your mouth (and probably does) for oral cancer very easily and quickly during your routine cleaning and exam. Ask your dentist if he or she performs oral cancer screenings to be sure.

Should I be concerned?
Mouth sores are common and rarely cause complications. Most go away in about a week, but it’s important to monitor any mouth sores you develop. If you are concerned, or if the sore doesn’t seem to be healing, contact your dentist or other medical professional for an examination.

Resources
www.agd.org
At the AGD’s Web site, you can search more than 300 oral health topics, post a dental question, sign up for e-newsletters, find an AGD dentist, and more.

877.2X.A.YEAR
AGD’s toll-free referral number. Call to locate an AGD member dentist in your area.