

Sunset Oral & Maxillofacial Surgery

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What is lichen planus?

Lichen planus is disorder that affects the skin and mucosa. While lichen planus can present anywhere, about fifty percent of patients will have only oral manifestations. Both men and women are affected and it occurs in every race. While it may occur at any age, it usually affects middle-aged adults.

What does lichen planus look like?

In the mouth, it looks like lacy white patches on the inside area of the cheeks. It can be present on the sides of the tongue and gums as well. Sometimes erosions or ulcerations can develop than can be very sore. On the skin lichen planus looks like purple or reddish-purple bumps with flat tops. They are uneven in shape and may have white scales or flakes on them. Lichen planus can appear on any area of the skin. The most common areas are the inner wrists, the forearms and the ankles. Lichen planus may also affect the scalp, the nails or the genitals. On the scalp, lichen planus may cause hair loss. Lichen planus of the nails can cause brittle or split nails. Sometimes lichen planus affects areas of skin where you had a cut or burn.

What causes lichen planus?

Lichen Planus is thought to be an autoimmune process that causes an inflammatory reaction. Lichen planus is not contagious. Many times the cause of lichen planus cannot be found. Some medicines you take may cause lichen planus. It is important to tell your doctor all the medicines you are taking. Some cases may be linked to viral infections. One of the more common viral infections is called hepatitis C virus. This virus can cause liver disease. Because it may not cause any symptoms, your doctor may need to order a blood test to check for it.

How will it affect me?

Oral lichen planus may have no symptoms at all. However, if erosions or ulcerations are present certain foods may increase the pain or burning. Lichen planus of the skin usually causes itching. The itching can be mild or very bad. Sometimes the bumps don't itch, but this isn't usual. You may have just a few small bumps or you may have a lot. After the bumps go away, they may leave a dark brown area on the skin. This is more likely to happen in persons of Asian, Hispanic or African heritage. These brown spots are not scars. They will slowly go away, but it may take many months. You can get lichen planus more than one time.

How can I be sure I have lichen planus?

Only your doctor can tell if you have lichen planus. In some cases the definitive diagnosis can be made with just a physical exam. If there is any suspicion the sores in your mouth are due to another condition, a biopsy may be required to confirm the diagnosis.

How is lichen planus treated?

There is no cure for lichen planus. Most of the time lichen planus goes away without any treatment in two years. Medications, such as topical steroids, and treatments can be given to help with the skin bumps, oral ulcerations, or to treat symptoms such as burning or itching. Ulcerations in the mouth need follow up to make sure they are resolving.