

Lichen planus

Patient Information

What is lichen planus?

Lichen planus is an inflammatory condition that can affect the lining of the mouth as well as the skin.

The cause is not fully understood. It is fairly common and affects up to two percent of the population. Lichen planus is most frequent in middle age and more women are affected than men.

Although there is no known cure, treatment can be given to make the symptoms better.

What does it look like?

Usually, lichen planus has a lace-like pattern of streaky white patches that occasionally can be thickened.

Often the patches are symmetrical, i.e. affect the same site on both sides of the mouth. Sometimes lichen planus may be associated with red patches or sores.

In the mouth, lichen planus is usually found on the inside of the cheeks and on the side of the tongue although it can also affect the gums and roof of the mouth.

Lichen planus is not:

- cancer
- inherited, i.e. passed on from your parents
- contagious - you cannot 'catch it' from someone who has it or give it to somebody else
- related to nutrition - although some foods you eat can make the patches of lichen planus sore

How is lichen planus diagnosed?

The clinical appearance of lichen planus is usually typical but the diagnosis needs confirmation with a biopsy (removal of a small amount of tissue which can then be looked at closely under a microscope).

How is lichen planus treated?

If lichen planus is not causing you any problem it does not require treatment. Your doctor will monitor it if necessary.

If lichen planus is causing you problems such as soreness, treatments can be given to lessen the symptoms. Usually these are given directly onto the affected areas (topically) rather than having medicine to swallow.

Is there anything else I can do?

- You may find it helpful to keep a diary and look for trigger events if you have a flare-up of symptoms. These flare-ups may be related to a particular food, stress or local trauma.
- You may find it useful to change to a milder form of toothpaste. It is important to maintain good hygiene in the mouth, especially around the gums.
- Some 'lichenoid' lesions can be related to amalgam (metal fillings). If this is the case for you, it may be suggested that a filling is replaced with an alternative substance but this is not a guaranteed cure.

Will I always have lichen planus?

This is difficult to say. Some people suffer for only a few months before their symptoms settle down. Others may suffer for many years. There may be dormant and active phases.

Further questions

If you have any questions or worries, please ask a member of the medical or nursing staff or telephone:

Maxillofacial Unit

Tel: 01342 414000 ext. 4708

Our usual opening times are Monday to Friday 8.30am – 5pm

Please ask if you would like this leaflet in larger print or an alternative format.