

CAMP HILL, Pa. (Aug. 10, 2023) — Your tongue health can tell you a lot about your oral and overall health. What does a change in color say about the state of your wellness?

"An examination of the tongue by your dentist or physician can help detect the first sign of an underlying health condition. A healthy tongue is pink and covered with small papillae bumps, better known as taste buds," said Katie Deffke, DDS, dental director, United Concordia Dental. "Any changes in color, like white, red or even black, can be indicative of an underlying health condition. Knowing what to look for and when to involve your provider can help with detecting any issues early on."

White tongue

White tongue is when a white film appears in patches, patterns or lines. Causes could include poor oral hygiene; vaping, smoking or chewing tobacco; excessive alcohol consumption; antibiotic consumption; and a poor diet.



Having a white tongue is a symptom of several conditions, including leukoplakia, an overgrowth of cells in the mouth which can sometimes lead to cancer; a chronic inflammatory condition called oral lichen planus; the sexually transmitted disease syphilis; and a yeast infection also known as oral thrush. Most often, having a white tongue is harmless and should go away on its own in a few weeks.

Red tongue

A noticeably red tongue, also known as strawberry tongue, can indicate several health conditions as well. If your tongue has an ever-shifting map of reddish spots with white borders, this could be a sign of "geographic tongue." These patches form from missing papillae, and the condition itself is harmless. Vitamin deficiencies, such as a lack of folic acid and vitamin B-12, can also give the tongue a red appearance.

What a Tongue Color Change Is Saying About Your Overall Health

If a red tongue is accompanied by a high fever, this could be a result of Kawasaki disease.

This is a serious condition most often seen in children younger than five. Besides a tongue that looks like a strawberry, the child may suffer from red and swollen hands and feet. Scarlet fever also gives the tongue a red and bumpy appearance and is accompanied by a high fever.

Black tongue

While it typically looks like black hair, black tongue discoloration can also be brown, white or yellow. It's generally harmless, caused by the papillae growing extremely long. These hair-like projections can harbor bacteria, resulting in a black, hairy appearance. This condition is often the consequence of poor oral hygiene, diabetes or receiving antibiotic or chemotherapy treatment.

"In most instances, practicing a better oral hygiene routine — including scraping or brushing the tongue, flossing daily and brushing twice a day — can help to remove dead skin cells and any discoloration, as well as improve oral health," said Deffke.

If any of these conditions persist after at-home treatment or other symptoms are experienced, such as pain or problems speaking or eating, a provider should be consulted.

For more oral health tips, visit the Oral Health Resources section at UnitedConcordia.com.

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