

# Thrush

Winter 2001

## Summary:

Thrush is a common fungal infection in people with HIV. A variety of drugs is available to treat thrush.

## What is thrush?

Thrush is the common name for oral candidiasis. It is caused by an overgrowth of *Candida*, a fungus that is normally found in the mouth, gastrointestinal tract and vagina, as well as on the skin. *Candida* is part of the normal “flora” of bacteria and fungi that live in or on the human body. *Candida* causes health problems only when there is an overgrowth. Thrush is the most common fungal infection in people with HIV.

## What are the symptoms of thrush?

Thrush usually appears as white patches on the tongue, the roof of the mouth, the insides of the cheeks or along the gums. The whitish layer can be easily scraped off, revealing a reddish, sore-looking area on the tissue below. Sometimes thrush appears as red sore spots on the tongue. Less commonly, it can appear as cracks and redness at the corners of the mouth. Thrush can cause discomfort or pain in the mouth and a bad or changed sense of taste.

## Diagnosis

Doctors usually diagnose thrush simply by looking at the lesions. Sometimes thrush looks like another mouth infection called oral hairy leukoplakia (OHL). However, OHL lesions cannot be scraped away. The diagnosis of thrush can be confirmed by scraping off a sample from

a lesion, staining it and examining it under the microscope.

## Prevention

Because the *Candida* fungus naturally lives in or on our bodies, it is impossible to avoid it. However, there are several ways to help keep it under control.

- Rinsing the mouth with water after eating, drinking or chewing gum; brushing the teeth after each meal; using dental floss; and visiting a dentist regularly can help maintain oral health.
- Cutting down on sugars and starchy food has been suggested as a way of helping to control thrush. Eating unsweetened yogurt with “live” bacterial culture (*Lactobacillus acidophilus*) or taking acidophilus capsules or powder with meals may also help.

## Treatment

The treatments for thrush can be divided into two groups:

- **topical treatments** (mouthwashes and lozenges), where the drug is in direct contact only with the inside of the mouth
- **systemic treatments** (pills or capsules), where the drug is circulated throughout the body by the blood

**Topical treatments** are cheap and have almost no side effects. However, they may taste unpleasant and they often take longer to work than systemic treatments. Although they are convenient, systemic treatments are more expensive and may cause side effects or interactions with other drugs.

**Topical treatments** for thrush include:

- nystatin (Mycostatin) or clotrimazole (Canesten, Clotrimaderm) tablets are dissolved in the mouth and swallowed, three to five times daily
- nystatin suspension is swished around in the mouth and swallowed, three to five times daily.

The amount of drug and the length of time it is taken varies, depending on the severity of the thrush. **Systemic treatments** include:

- ketoconazole (Nizoral) tablets (200 mg - 400 mg daily)
- fluconazole (Diflucan) tablets (100 mg - 800 mg daily)
- itraconazole (Sporanox) tablets (100 mg - 400 mg daily)
- itraconazole (Sporanox) oral solution (100 mg - 200 mg daily).

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*Deirdre Maclean*

## Disclaimer

Decisions about particular medical treatments should always be made in consultation with a qualified medical practitioner knowledgeable about HIV-related illness and the treatments in question.

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### Contact CATIE

#### by telephone

1-800-263-1638

(416) 203-7122

#### by fax

(416) 203-8284

#### by e-mail

info@catie.ca

#### on the Web

<http://www.catie.ca>

#### by mail

505-555 Richmond Street West, Box 1104

Toronto, Ontario M5V 3B1

Canada

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