WHAT CAN YOUR TONGUE TELL YOU ABOUT YOUR HEALTH?

Our tongue—that little muscular organ that helps you to chew, swallow, and taste food. Most of the time we don’t even think about it, but it plays an important role in the digestive system. But it can do so much more, including providing a snapshot of your overall health!

Symptoms of many chronic and acute illnesses can appear on your tongue. In fact, sometimes they’re among the very first signs that something is wrong. So what’s normal for a tongue? When you look in the mirror a normal tongue should be pinkish red.

If you look in the mirror and your tongue is bright red and glossy, you may have a vitamin B12 deficiency. Vitamin B12 and iron are needed to mature papillae (those small little cone-shaped bumps, that contain taste buds). If you are deficient in those vitamins, you lose those papillae, which can make your tongue appear smooth. In severe cases, this “balding” can cause pain when eating hot liquids or spicy food.

When you look in the mirror and see cottage cheese white, you may have a yeast infection or thrush. The condition is often linked to antibiotics. Thrush, which might cause taste disturbances or a bit of pain, can also occur in those with weakened immune systems. Typical in young children, thrush also affects people with autoimmune diseases, people with poorly controlled diabetes, chemotherapy patients, and the elderly. If you suspect you might have thrush, see your doctor. Unlike other yeast infections, thrush does not respond to over the counter products.

The last thing you expect to see on your tongue is brown or black fuzz, but if you do, don’t be alarmed. A tongue covered in dark hairs (actually called “black and hairy tongue”) may look nasty, but doctors agree that it’s not cause for major concern. The papillae are normally worn down by chewing and drinking, but sometimes they can become overgrown, which makes them more likely to harbor bacteria or become discolored from food. This can cause bad breath or taste abnormalities. Typically, black and hairy tongue is brought on by smoking, drinking coffee and dark teas, or poor dental hygiene. Removing the offending cause, like smoking, and brushing the tongue or using a tongue scraper, may be all you need.

If you see small patches of white on your tongue, something is irritating it. Painless white patches are called leukoplakia and are caused by an excess growth of cells. Often associated with smokers, the lesions have about a 5 to 17 percent chance of developing into cancer. On the bright side, leukoplakia can reverse when you stop smoking. If you are not a smoker, and still notice these patches of white, sometimes they can result just from the abrasion of the tooth constantly rubbing against the tongue. But if it doesn’t go away in a week or two, it’s extremely important to see your dentist, who might recommend a biopsy.

You may notice persistent red lesions on your tongue, indicating possible signs of cancer. Not to be confused with a canker sore, which resolves on its’ own within two weeks, red lesions or patches that don’t go away could be serious. Get it checked immediately. Though typically attributed to tobacco use, oral cancer can also be caused by the HPV virus. Get it checked out even if it’s not bothering you—many oral cancers don’t hurt in their early stages.

Does your tongue sting or burn but look perfectly normal? Hormonal changes could be to blame. Women are seven times more likely to experience it than men. It’s uncertain why this occurs, and the condition goes away in some individuals while it persists in others. Another cause could be that you are developing an allergy to certain toothpastes. An ingredient called sodium lauryl sulfate (SLS), which helps toothpaste get foamy, can also cause stinging- sometimes suddenly. You may need to switch to a toothpaste without SLS.

Life can get stressful and your tongue will let you know. Canker sores can appear on your tongue or other parts of your mouth when we are overly stressed. These are punched-out, painful areas that occur on the tongue or cheeks. They are most painful for the first four to five days, then subside and eventually disappear within two weeks. Warm salt water rinses may help relieve some of the discomfort.

So the next time you look in the mirror, stick out your tongue and see if it’s trying to tell you something!