Weird tongue color [1]

Hi Alice,

I noticed that I have a weird furred tongue (a mix of yellow/green or sometimes orange/yellow) since about half a year (maybe longer than that but only noticed it since half a year). I also noticed that the day after I drink alcohol my tongue looks normal. My tongue is always like that, so I don't believe it could be because of anything specific that I drink/eat. Could that be anything serious?

Thank you,

Jenn

Answer

Dear Jenn,

While only a trip to a health care provider can confirm exactly what is causing your furred tongue, the good news is that most changes in tongue color and texture (like what you described) are completely harmless and temporary. This type of discoloration can occur when the little bumps on the tongue ? called papillae ? become enlarged and bacteria in the mouth grows. This condition is called yellow tongue.

Sometimes, yellow tongue can be an early stage of black, hairy tongue. Despite the dramatic-sounding name, this condition is also usually temporary and harmless. Black, hairy tongue develops when dead cells build up on the papillae, inviting bacteria, yeast, and food to become trapped in them. Also, if you use tobacco products, they can stain the longer-than-usual papillae. Black, hairy tongue does not always have to be black in color but instead can be yellow, green, white, brown, or tan. According to the Mayo Clinic [2], other signs of black, hairy tongue include:

- A hairy or furry-looking tongue
- A metallic taste in mouth
- Bad breath (known as halitosis [3])
- A gagging or tickling sensation

Now you know what it looks like, but what causes it? There are several potential causes of black, hairy tongue including:
• Antibiotic use (that may alter the bacteria or yeast in the mouth)
• Lack of proper oral hygiene
• Dry mouth (known as xerostomia)
• Medications that contain bismuth
• Using mouthwashes that contain oxidizing agents (like peroxide) or astringent agents (like witch hazel or menthol)
• Use of tobacco products
• Tongue irritation from drinking beverages that are too hot
• Eating only soft foods that do not rub dead skin cells off the tongue

Jenn, you write that the day after drinking alcohol, your tongue no longer has the furry, discolored look to it. It is possible that the alcohol may be acting as an antibacterial agent that kills the bacteria in the mouth (think of it this way ? some mouthwashes contain alcohol). However, this may not be the healthiest option for getting rid of bacteria. There are other antibacterial agents that you can incorporate into your daily oral hygiene routine to improve the condition of your tongue. Brushing your tongue and teeth, and flossing regularly are tried-and-true methods of keeping oral bacteria in check. Other options you might consider trying are increasing the amount of fiber in your diet (this helps decrease the bacteria in your mouth) or try brushing your tongue with a solution of one part hydrogen peroxide to five parts water (just make sure you rinse your mouth with water when you are done).

Most people do not need to seek any type of medical treatment for yellow tongue or black, hairy tongue. However, yellow tongue can be a sign of jaundice (when the liver does not work properly, causing a build-up of bilirubin ? a yellow chemical in the hemoglobin ? which makes skin, whites of the eyes, or tongue turn a yellow-ish color). Although jaundice is rare, if you are concerned, you might want to seek the opinion of a health care provider.

Bringing your question to a medical professional may rule out anything serious and put your mind at ease. No need to bite your tongue about this!

Alice!
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