



**Figure 1.** An example of “black hairy tongue”



**Figure 2.** This patient with hairy tongue was told to use a tongue scraper only on the left side of his tongue.



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# Hairy/Coated Tongue Patient Information



### ***What is hairy or coated tongue?***

“Hairy” or “coated” tongue is a harmless, but sometimes annoying problem that is seen rather frequently. People who complain of this condition are almost always adults, and it can affect men or women.

### ***What causes coated tongue?***

Basically, the top surface of the tongue is an area that is typically subjected to a lot of irritation on a daily basis. This irritation is often due to hot drinks or rough foods (tortilla chips, etc.). For this reason, humans have been designed to have the tops of their tongues produce a layer of protective dead cells called “keratin”. This is the same material that forms our hair and fingernails. It is also the same material that forms when we, for example, use a rake in the yard, and calluses develop on the palms of our hands. The calluses are made up of keratin.

The keratin formed on the top of our tongues is knocked off and swallowed when we eat our meals. Normally the amount of keratin produced is equal to the amount knocked off, and our tongues appear normal. Sometimes this balance is upset, however, and the condition

called “coated tongue” results. This may be due to the keratin not being knocked off as quickly, as seen with people who are eating a softer, less abrasive diet (denture wearers especially). On the other hand, some people will develop this problem when the keratin is produced more quickly than it can be knocked off and swallowed. This increased production of keratin is usually due to irritation of the top of the tongue due to drinking hot beverages or smoking tobacco. The accumulation of keratin on the filiform papillae (“taste buds”) of the tongue gives the tongue a kind of “hairy” appearance.

### ***What is the difference between coated and hairy tongue?***

The difference between these two terms is basically that of the degree of keratin accumulation. With coated tongue, the accumulation is not severe. With hairy tongue, the amount of keratin is such that hair-like projections of the keratin material form on the top of the tongue.

### ***What about the color of my tongue? Sometimes it seems black or brown.***

Because the keratin is composed of dead cells, this material can act as a place for the normal bacteria found in the mouth

to accumulate and grow. Some of these bacteria can produce pigments while they grow, resulting in a brown or black color to the top of the tongue (Figure 1). The bacteria are harmless and cannot be eliminated from the mouth (regardless of what the mouthwash advertisements suggest!).

### ***Can people catch this from me?***

No, absolutely not. While several medical textbooks suggest that this is due to some sort of infection, very little evidence supports that theory. In fact, we have seen numerous cases of coated or hairy tongue that have been treated with a variety of antibiotics that had no effect whatsoever.

### ***Is there any cure for coated tongue?***

Generally the most effective treatment for this condition is the daily use of a tongue scraper, which removes the dead keratinized cells from the top of the tongue (Figure 2). Stopping or reducing any habits that might cause irritation to the top of the tongue also usually helps reduce the problem. Of course it is important to realize that this is a harmless condition, and if it doesn’t cause too many symptoms, it really doesn’t require treatment.