

Re-Evaluating Leukoplakia Management: A Risk-Stratified Approach in Oral Medicine

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Opinion

Leukoplakia is the white patch or plaque, which cannot be scrubbed off, and remains as one of the most prevalent potentially malignant disorders of the oral cavity, clinically or histopathologically cannot be classified as any specific diseases affecting approximately 2% of the global adult population. Although it has traditionally been defined as a white patch of questionable risk following exclusion of other known diseases, this concept may underestimate the heterogeneity of its biological behavior and the spectrum of malignant potential it encompasses [1]. In daily practice, oral medicine specialists and general dental practitioners frequently encounter individuals presenting with asymptomatic white lesions, often accompanied by a positive history of tobacco use, alcohol consumption, or betel quid chewing. These presentations are often regarded as benign or transient and early dysplastic changes may therefore be missed. This is an oral medicine-centered perspective that describes leukoplakia as a multifactorial and gradually progressive condition shaped by genetic susceptibility, environmental exposure, microbial burden, and subtle clinical warning signs. Rather than restricting management to a binary classification of homogeneous versus non-homogeneous subtype which have high frequency of developing into dysplasia or carcinoma, risk assessment should also take into account lesion duration, anatomic site, patient age, and symptom-oriented clinical evaluation [2]. In this context, nonspecific symptoms such as altered texture, surface irregularity, or induration may reflect early epithelial dysregulation preceding overt dysplasia, especially in high-risk individuals [3]. This perspective challenges the traditional view of leukoplakia as a static condition and supports a shift toward earlier, proactive management strategies in oral medicine.

Oral leukoplakia remains a major global health challenge, with malignant transformation rates reported between 1.3% and 2.6% across diverse populations. Conventional diagnostic approaches rely heavily on clinical morphology and histopathological grading of epithelial dysplasia, which may delay recognition until significant cytological atypia has developed. However, leukoplakia is increasingly understood as a dynamic and multifactorial condition that evolves over time through the interaction of genetic, environmental, and microbial factors. Oral medicine offers a unique opportunity for early identification because of continuous patient follow-up and longitudinal surveillance. Leukoplakia should therefore be reconsidered not as a condition that appears abruptly with dysplasia, but as a gradual and dynamic process [4].

In conclusion: leukoplakia does not begin when dysplasia crosses a histopathological threshold; it begins much earlier, within a continuum of genetic predisposition, field cancerization, and subtle clinical signals. An oral medicine-centered, risk-stratified, and molecularly-informed approach may significantly improve early detection and prevention strategies and transform clinicians into proactive risk managers.

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