



Oral care during cancer treatment

Cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy drugs and radiation, can cause trouble in your mouth.

Oral side effects from cancer treatments can include¹

- cavities;
- changes in taste;
- dry mouth;
- jaw stiffness;
- oral sores.

Some side effects from cancer treatments can cause problems with eating, talking, or swallowing; others can make it harder to fight infections. You may be able to reduce the risk or seriousness of oral side effects by working together with your dentist and the doctor treating your cancer.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

There are some things you can do to help reduce the risk or seriousness of these problems.

See your dentist

The National Cancer Institute recommends that you see the dentist 4 weeks before you begin chemotherapy or radiation treatment.² Your dentist can look for things like cavities, gum disease, and mouth sores—anything that can get worse or cause problems during your cancer treatment. Your dentist can take care of problems in your mouth and may help you avoid delay in the treatment of your cancer.

Reduce the risk of cavities

Cancer treatment may increase your risk of cavities. Good oral hygiene—taking care of your teeth—can help lower this risk. To take care of your teeth, do the following:

- brush your teeth twice a day with toothpaste that has fluoride in it;
- clean between your teeth once a day with floss or another cleaner designed for that purpose;
- avoid sugary foods and drinks.

Limit the effects of dry mouth

Radiation treatments for head and neck cancer can damage the salivary glands, which can cause you to have a dry mouth. Many medications, including those that are used for chemotherapy, also can cause dry mouth.

Here are some tips for making yourself more comfortable if your mouth is dry:

- sip water or sugarless drinks that do not contain caffeine;
- suck on (do not chew) ice chips;
- apply lanolin-based lip balm often;
- use sugar-free chewing gum or sugar-free candy to stimulate saliva production;

- if you use a mouthrinse, choose one that is alcohol free;
- use a humidifier at night.

Here are some other things that might be helpful:

- avoid salty or spicy foods;
- limit alcoholic beverages;
- stop any use of tobacco.

Lessen jaw stiffness

Radiation treatment for head and neck cancer can cause stiffness of the jaw muscles. This can be painful and may make it harder to chew and swallow. Your dentist or the doctor treating your cancer can teach you stretching exercises that may help.³

Seek treatment for oral sores

Oral sores are painful and can result in infections that may interfere with your cancer treatment. Talk to your dentist or the doctor treating your cancer if you notice a sore developing³ so you can get treatment for it started as soon as possible. They also may suggest an ointment or rinse to reduce pain from the sore.

CONCLUSION

Cancer treatment can have side effects that affect your mouth. Working together with your dentist and the doctor treating your cancer may help you reduce the risk and seriousness of these side effects. Your dentist can help. See your dentist before you begin treatment for cancer and let him or her know about any problems with your mouth during treatment. ■

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“For the Patient” provides general information on dental treatments. It is designed to prompt discussion between dentist and patient about treatment options and does not substitute for the dentist’s professional assessment based on the individual patient’s needs and desires.

You can find more information for patients at ADAcatalog.org or at MouthHealthy.org.

1. National Cancer Institute. Managing oral complications during and after chemotherapy or radiation therapy. Available at: https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatments/side-effects/mouth-throat/oral-complications-pdq#section/_9. Accessed October 19, 2018.

2. National Cancer Institute. Preventing and treating oral complications before chemotherapy and radiation therapy begins. Available at: https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/mouth-throat/oral-complications-pdq#section/_7. Accessed October 19, 2018.

3. Levi LE, Lalla RV. Dental treatment planning for the patient with oral cancer. *Dent Clin North Am.* 2018;62(1):121-130.