

Mouth Problems During Chemotherapy and Radiation

The most common mouth problems during cancer treatment are mucositis and xerostomia.

What are mucositis and xerostomia?

Mucositis occurs when cancer treatments damage the cells lining your mouth or other parts of the gastrointestinal tract (gut). This can cause pain, sores and ulcers in the mouth and throat.

Chemotherapy can cause mucositis anywhere in the gut. Radiotherapy only causes mucositis in the area where the radiotherapy is given.

Xerostomia is having a dry mouth. It happens when cancer treatment damages the salivary glands, so they make less saliva (spit).

How long do these effects last?

Mucositis usually gets better a few weeks to months after the end of treatment.

Xerostomia caused by radiation therapy to the head and neck area can last for months after treatment, and can be permanent in some patients.

What can I do for mouth problems?

It is very important to keep your mouth clean.

- Brush your teeth and tongue gently after each meal and at bedtime, using:
 - a soft toothbrush or electric toothbrush
 - a mild toothpaste containing fluoride
- Rinse your mouth and dentures after you eat, or brush your teeth, using either:
 - 1/4 teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda in 1 cup of warm water, or
 - 1/4 teaspoon salt in 1 cup of warm water, or
 - an alcohol-free mouthwash.

- Take your dentures out when you don't need them, and clean them well after using them.
- If your mouth is too sore to brush, or you have bleeding when you brush, then just rinse your mouth as described above.
- Remember, DO NOT use mouthwash that contains alcohol.

Important

Contact your doctor or nurse immediately if you:

- have a temperature of 38°C or higher
- have uncontrolled pain
- are unable to eat or drink
- are bleeding from the mouth
- have difficulty opening your mouth or swallowing
- have white spots in your mouth
- are coughing a lot when eating or drinking

If you can't contact your doctor or nurse, go to the nearest hospital emergency department for help.



Dental flossing

If you usually floss your teeth, you can continue during treatment but only if there is no bleeding when you floss.

If there is bleeding when you floss then stop flossing. This could cause an infection in the mouth or in the bloodstream.

If you have never flossed do not start during treatment.

Tips to help with mouth problems

Keep your mouth clean	• Start mouth care at the beginning of your treatment. • Clean your mouth and teeth regularly (see previous page).
Protect your mouth	• Cut down or stop smoking. • Keep your mouth and lips moist using lip balm, sucking on ice chips or sipping water. • If your mouth is dry, try using artificial saliva, sugarless lollies, and oral moisturisers.
Check your mouth	• Use a mirror and bright light to look inside your mouth every day for sores, red or white areas, or bleeding.
Look after your teeth	• See a dentist to have any dental problems fixed before you start your cancer treatment. • Tell your dentist you are having cancer treatment at each visit.
Managing pain	• Take your pain medicine as prescribed, particularly before meals.
Eating and drinking	• Choose foods that are soft, moist, and easy to swallow, such as rice, mashed potatoes, scrambled eggs, and yoghurt. • Use gravies and sauces to moisten foods. • Don't eat crunchy, acidic or spicy foods. • Don't drink alcohol or sour juice. • Avoid food and drink that is very hot or cold.

Common questions

Why is mucositis a problem?

- it can be very painful and stop you from eating and drinking properly
- mucositis can also make it easier for infections to get into your body

What are the signs and symptoms of mucositis?

- painful spots, sores or bleeding in your mouth
- a white coating on the tongue, or in the throat
- difficulty and pain with eating, swallowing or wearing dentures
- sensitivity to hot, cold, salty, spicy or acidic foods and drinks

Why is xerostomia a problem?

- saliva (spit) is important for keeping your mouth healthy
- patients who don't have enough saliva can get dental decay (holes in your teeth)

What are the signs and symptoms of xerostomia?

- thick or rope-like saliva
- not as much saliva as normal
- a sticky or dry feeling in your mouth
- problems chewing, tasting and swallowing
- difficulty talking, as the tongue can get stuck to the inside of your mouth