



CANCERcare®

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fact sheet

COPING WITH MOUTH SORES DURING TREATMENT

Radiation to the head and neck area and some types of chemotherapy can cause sores inside the mouth and on the mucous lining of the throat and digestive tract. These sores, called mucositis, can cause pain and infections, making it difficult to eat, drink and swallow. Before starting treatment, talk to your health care team about mouth sores and your oral health.

SYMPTOMS OF MOUTH SORES

- Gums appear to be swollen and red
- Throat and mouth feel sore or tender
- Small ulcers
- Discomfort in the throat or mouth, especially when eating hot or cold foods
- A change in the amount of mucus in the mouth

THE IMPORTANCE OF MAINTAINING ORAL HEALTH

During treatment, it's important to take care of your mouth, which includes keeping it clean. Here are some tips that can help maintain good oral health:



Talk to your dentist. Keep your dentist informed before and throughout treatment. Your dentist can make sure that your mouth is as healthy as possible before you begin treatment and can provide important information to the rest of your health care team.

Be gentle. Use a soft-bristle brush for brushing your teeth.

You don't have to use toothpaste. If toothpaste bothers your mouth, use a mixture of a half teaspoon of salt with four cups of water.

Try gargling. Use a solution made up of one quart of plain water, a half teaspoon of table salt and a half teaspoon of baking soda.

Drink plenty of fluids. When possible, drink 1-2 glasses of water immediately after you wake up. Your body is dehydrated after sleep and treatment can cause dehydration. Keep in mind the coffee can cause dehydration. Try drinking two cups of water for every cup of coffee.

For more information on oral health, read CancerCare's fact sheet titled "The Importance of Dental Health."

SOOTHING MOUTH PAIN

There are several options for soothing mouth pain. Before you begin any of these treatments, talk with your health care team about the best options for you.

- Ice chips or popsicles

(over)

- Ibuprofen or acetaminophen (such as Tylenol) for mild pain
- Over-the-counter oral anesthetics, such as Anbesol, Xylocaine or Orajel. Let your health care team know if you are using them, especially if doctor has prescribed a lidocaine-based mouthwash.
- Gelclair, an oral gel designed to coat and soothe mouth sores by forming a protective barrier in the mouth. This product is available by prescription only.
- “Magic mouthwash” is another prescription product designed to soothe mouth sores. It contains Maalox to coat the mouth and lidocaine to relieve the pain. Some pharmacies that specialize in cancer care offer their own version of magic mouthwash.
- Opiates, a class of drugs that includes morphine, may also be prescribed to help you cope with mouth pain. A fast-acting opiate called fentanyl citrate is available in a berry-flavored lozenge on a stick (Actiq and others). It may be used to help prevent mouth sores. Like a cough drop, the lozenge dissolves in the mouth, and the drug is delivered quickly into the bloodstream.

It's important to manage mouth pain because it can affect your quality of life and even slow progress toward better health. When your pain is controlled, you will be better able to eat and drink fluids. Once treatment ends, mouth sores tend to disappear within a few weeks. If you experience any changes in your mouth, be sure to report them to your health care team.

GET SUPPORT

The physical and emotional effects of cancer and treatment can be significant. An oncology social worker can help you navigate this process. CancerCare's professional oncology social workers provide individual counseling, support groups and locate local resources for anyone affected by cancer, free of charge. To speak with a professional oncology social worker, call 800-813-HOPE (4673).



CancerCare® Can Help

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by professional oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit www.cancercare.org or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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