



CANCERcare®

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fact sheet

THE IMPORTANCE OF DENTAL HEALTH

It's important to manage mouth pain because it can affect your quality of life and even slow progress toward better health. It's essential that you talk with your doctor about your dental health and visit your dentist before 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.

WHAT TO EXPECT DURING TREATMENT

If you experience any changes in your mouth, be sure to report them to your health care team. During treatment, you may experience the following:

Mouth sores. Radiation treatments for head and neck cancer 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 be a serious problem because they can cause pain and infections, making it difficult to eat, drink and swallow. Read our 'Coping With Mouth Sores During Treatment' fact sheet for more information.

Dry mouth. Cancer treatments can cause dry mouth (also known as xerostomia), which damages the salivary glands and can cause dental problems. Saliva protects against infections and cavities (tooth decay) while maintaining a balance of bacteria in the mouth. Without enough saliva, the bacteria and other organisms in the mouth can grow quickly, causing infections and mouth sores.

Sensitive gums. Chemotherapy can cause tenderness, bleeding or inflammation of the gums.

Jaw aches and pains. Radiation near the head and neck can cause jaw pain or stiffness.

Taste changes. During treatment, food may taste differently. Sometimes people recommend lemon drops or mint candy to help.

WAYS TO PROTECT YOUR MOUTH DURING TREATMENT

Brush your teeth gently and often. Soaking your tooth brush in warm water can make the bristles softer. If toothpaste irritates your mouth, use a mixture of a half teaspoon of salt with four cups of water. Gargling may also help. Use a solution made up of one quart of plain water, a half teaspoon of table salt and a half teaspoon of baking soda.

Rinse your mouth out with water frequently. This can help keep food away from your teeth and gums.

Ice chips or sugar-free popsicles. Ask for ice chips or sugar-free popsicles during chemotherapy. These can lessen any soreness around the mouth.

Floss frequently. Gently flossing can help remove plaque between the teeth and prevent cavities.



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Avoid mouthwash with alcohol. Alcohol can dry out and further irritate your mouth.

Stay hydrated. Drinking plenty of water can help with dry mouth. Try to avoid fluids that are acidic like orange or cranberry juice.

Eat well. Eating healthy is important during treatment, but may be difficult when experiencing side effects. Avoid adding many spices to your food that may irritate your mouth. Also avoid foods that cause an unpleasant reaction. Try preparing foods that stimulate your sense of taste and are high in protein.

See your dentist throughout treatment. Keep your dentist informed on your diagnosis and treatment.

SPEAK WITH YOUR HEALTH CARE TEAM

Be prepared and be informed. Talk to your doctor about any changes you may experience to maintain your dental health. You may want to ask your doctor the following questions:

- How will my treatment affect my dental health?
- What can I do before treatment to protect my dental health?
- What information do I provide to my dentist?
- Will my treatment have a long-term impact on my dental health?
- If I have dental problems during treatment, can the problem be addressed right away?

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 case management, 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 master's-prepared oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

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

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RESOURCES

Dental Lifeline Network
nfdh.org

National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research
nidcr.nih.gov

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