

Word of Mouth: How to Address Oral Problems Caused by Cancer Treatments

Cancer treatment often causes unique—but treatable—oral problems. Your health care team and dentist can help.

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Chemotherapy, targeted medications and radiation work by killing fast-growing cancer cells. But these lifesaving treatments can also directly harm healthy cells in the mouth, glands and bones, especially among people with head and neck cancers. What's more, these treatments often cause oral side effects, such as pain; dry mouth; burning, peeling or swelling of the tongue; infections; and changes in taste—all of which can make it difficult to eat, talk or swallow. Cancer treatments may also worsen existing oral and dental problems, including cavities, loose crowns and gum disease. However, you can address these common downsides in a number of ways.

1. Before starting treatment, visit your dentist. Dealing with existing issues, such as a broken tooth or cavities, helps lower the chance of complications during cancer treatment. Consider adding an oncology dentist to your care team. These specialists provide dental care to patients with cancer and can work with others on your care team to help prevent, monitor and manage treatment-related oral complications. If you already started treatment before seeing a dentist, then schedule a visit with one as soon as possible.
2. Step up your oral hygiene during cancer treatment. This will decrease the risk of complications. Check your mouth daily for any problems, such as sores or dry mouth. Use an extra-soft toothbrush to clean your teeth, tongue and gums after each meal and at bedtime. If brushing hurts, then soak your brush in warm water beforehand. Use a fluoride toothpaste and alcohol-free mouthwash, and gently floss daily, avoiding sores and bleeding areas. Rinsing with a solution of a quarter teaspoon of salt or 1 teaspoon of baking soda in one cup of warm water can help soothe pain. And don't forget about your lips: Keep them moisturized.
3. Choose foods carefully, and eat slowly. Opt for nutritious foods that are soft, moist and easy to chew and swallow. (Think scrambled eggs, mashed potatoes, cooked cereals, yogurt and foods softened with gravy or broth.) Be sure to take small bites, chew your food slowly and sip liquids throughout your meals. Avoid potentially irritating foods, such as sharp-edged chips, citrus fruits and juices, soda, alcoholic drinks and sugary candy. Also avoid using toothpicks and skip all tobacco products. If your mouth is dry, sip water, chew sugarless gum or ice chips, suck on sugar-

free candy or lozenges or ask your doctor to recommend an over-the-counter saliva substitute.

4. Speak up, and don't suffer in silence. Inform your health care team of any oral problems you experience. Providers can help find the most effective medicines to manage oral pain, dry mouth, difficulty swallowing, changes in taste and more. These issues can be more than painful inconveniences. They can trigger malnutrition, dehydration and other complications.

Finally, here's news to make you smile: Most oral side effects improve when cancer treatment ends.

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<http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/article/word-mouth-oral-problems-cancer-treatments>