

Department of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery

Mouth care during radiotherapy or chemotherapy

This information is aimed at patients with a diagnosis of head and neck cancer and are having radiotherapy or chemotherapy treatment.

Radiotherapy and chemotherapy to the head and neck are treatments that are used to treat cancer

Both treatments can affect the mouth by making it dry or by making it sore. It is important that your oral health is as good as possible before the start of treatment to avoid problems later.

Ensure that you have a thorough dental check-up and seek advice from a dentist or dental hygienist before your therapy starts. If you do not have your own dentist this may be arranged by your oncology team.

Throughout your radiotherapy or chemotherapy your mouth needs careful monitoring by either a dental hygienist or an appropriately trained nurse

What can I expect during treatment?

About two weeks after the start of your treatment you may notice an increase in mouth ulcers and mouth soreness. Your mouth will become dry and there will be a loss of taste. These changes will make it difficult to swallow, eat and clean your teeth. They are worse between two and five weeks after starting treatment after which they may gradually improve.

This leaflet explains what can be done to help you cope with these unwanted side effects of treatment.



Patient Information

Unwanted effects of treatment	What happened?	What can I do?	What to avoid?
Loss of taste	Taste buds are damaged by radiotherapy and chemotherapy	<p>Unfortunately there is little you can do.</p> <p>Taste may return; as it does you will notice an unpleasant taste for a time but this will improve</p>	Sweet food or drinks – a great temptation at this time but if taken between meals or before bedtime you will rapidly get tooth decay
Difficulty swallowing	Dryness and soreness of the mouth makes swallowing difficult	<p>Rinse your mouth or gargle or spray with Difflam, a pain-relieving mouthwash before eating.</p> <p>Eat moist food and sip water frequently.</p>	<p>Alcohol will increase mouth dryness</p> <p>Stickier foods – pastry, chocolate, fresh white bread, and mashed potato</p>
Jaw Stiffness	The muscles that move the jaw can become stiff as a result of radiotherapy	<p>Gentle jaw exercises can be given to you.</p> <p>You may be given an appliance to help you</p>	
Dry Mouth	Saliva moistens the mouth and protects against tooth decay, tooth sensitivity and erosive wear. Radiotherapy damages the glands which produce saliva. The dryness is worse during treatment. In some patients saliva may not return following radiotherapy.	<p>Sip sugar-free drinks frequently- Cold water or tooth friendly drinks.</p> <p>Chew sugar free gum</p> <p>Try saliva substitutes which are available on prescription. Always choose one that contains fluoride and is not acidic (Gladosane is acidic)</p> <p>Moisturising cream can be used on lips</p>	<p>Fizzy drinks, diet drinks and fruit juice are acidic and will make your teeth sensitive. If unavoidable, drink ice cold with a straw.</p> <p>Food or drinks containing sugar should be avoided especially between meals.</p> <p>Many prescription medicines are acidic or sugary and will damage your teeth or the mouth lining. Check with your doctor for alternatives.</p> <p>Avoid any sugary / acidic food and drink within 1 hour of bedtime</p>

Patient Information

Unwanted effects of treatment	What happened?	What can I do?	What to avoid?
Sore Mouth	<p>Radiotherapy and chemotherapy can damage normal cells. The inside of the mouth, tongue and throat may become red, sore and ulcerated.</p> <p>You will find it uncomfortable to eat and speak, swallow and brush your teeth. The soreness may be due to a thrush infection.</p>	<p>Clean your teeth with a fluoride toothpaste and soft toothbrush if possible.</p> <p>Diffiam spray / mouthwash may be useful to relieve pain; use before brushing.</p> <p>You may need medication if you have thrush</p>	<p>Hard food, spicy food and hot drinks will be painful.</p> <p>Avoid alcohol and tobacco; they will make the sore dry mouth worse.</p> <p>Strongly flavoured toothpaste will be uncomfortable to use and should be avoided.</p> <p>Citrus or acidic food and drinks</p>
Tooth decay	<p>Saliva normally helps to protect the teeth. The absence of saliva encourages tooth decay.</p>	<p>Brush your teeth regularly with a fluoride toothpaste.</p> <p>Always use a fluoride mouthwash or gel as directed by your dentist.</p> <p>Chew sugar free gum after a meal or a snack.</p> <p>You should visit your dentist and hygienist regularly; three month check ups are recommended for the first 5 years following radiotherapy</p>	<p>Food/drink containing acid/fizzy drinks, especially between meals or before bedtime.</p> <p>Avoid brushing after acid exposure/vomiting.</p> <p>Mouthwashes containing alcohol</p>

Patient Information

Unwanted effects of treatment	What happened?	What can I do?	What to avoid?
Tooth erosion	<p>Saliva protects teeth from the effects of acid from food/drink or associated indigestion.</p> <p>Without saliva, teeth can wear and become sensitive if exposed to acid</p>	<p>Brush teeth before acid exposure.</p> <p>Use sugar free gum after food/drink.</p> <p>Have alkaline food – such as cheese – at the end of meals</p>	<p>Food/drink containing acid/fizzy drinks especially between meals or before bedtime.</p> <p>Avoid brushing after acid exposure/vomiting</p> <p>Use an alcohol free fluoride mouthrinse</p>
Loss of weight	<p>Mouth soreness, dryness and difficulty swallowing will reduce your appetite and enthusiasm for food</p>	<p>Eat high energy foods such as pasta, bread, yams and potatoes.</p> <p>You will be monitored by a Dietitian.</p>	
Difficulty with dentures	<p>Lack of saliva and mouth soreness makes dentures difficult to wear</p>	<p>See your dentist if your dentures are painful</p> <p>KY jelly is a useful lubricant under dentures.</p> <p>Clean your dentures carefully after each meal, at least twice daily.</p> <p>Clean the dentures with unperfumed soap and a brush.</p> <p>Dentures should be left out at night – soak in an appropriate cleanser for up to 20 minutes and afterwards rinse and place in a pot containing cold water.</p>	<p>Leaving your dentures out during cancer treatment can make it more difficult to restart using them later.</p> <p>If dentures are old or poorly fitting you will probably need new ones. It is best to leave this until 4-6 months after the end of radiotherapy</p>

Patient Information

Further Information

For more information please contact your named nurse.

See also the Hospital's leaflets on Diet and Cancer Care:

- Sore Mouth & Throat
- Dry Mouth
- Taste Changes

Macmillan Cancer Information Centre

Tel: 024 7696 6052

We offer free support, practical advice and information to anyone affected by cancer
The Centre is located in the main entrance of the hospital and is open Monday to Friday
9.00am – 4.00pm.

Macmillan Cancer Support

Tel: 0808 808 00 00

www.macmillan.org.uk

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact 024 7696 5244 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy

Document History

Department	Oral & Maxillofacial Surgery Department
Contact Tel	26500
Published	May 2011
Reviewed	July 2012, January 2014, March 2016, July 2018
Review	July 2020
Version	5
Reference No	HIC/LFT/1209/11