
Head and Neck Team

Mouth care and Head and Neck Radiotherapy

Sometimes the treatment that you are having, or the cancer itself, can make you prone to developing a sore mouth. This will occur if your mouth is in the treatment area.

Good mouth care helps to keep the mouth clean, moist and comfortable. It is especially important to take good care of your mouth while you are receiving treatment.

Chemotherapy affects rapidly dividing normal cells such as those that make up the lining of the mouth and gut. This may result in inflammation and ulceration of the lining of the mouth causing pain and discomfort. Radiotherapy in or around the area of your mouth can also make it dry and sore.

The severity of the soreness will depend upon the area that is being treated and the number of treatments that you are given. Common symptoms include redness, swelling, ulceration and bleeding inside the mouth. There can also be infection, particularly oral thrush or cold sores (herpes simplex).

If mouth soreness occurs, it will become noticeable about 10 days into your treatment. During your treatment the team will monitor your mouth condition regularly and will continue to advise you about care.

The following advice can help to keep your mouth comfortable and reduce the severity of the soreness.

Before treatment

It is important that a dentist sees you before your treatment starts. This will ensure that your teeth and gums are in the best condition, beforehand. Some unhealthy teeth may need to be removed before you start your treatment. You can see your usual dentist or an appointment can be made for you to see a hospital dentist.

Preventative / During treatment Advice

To help keep your mouth clean:

- Clean your gums and/or teeth after every meal or sugary drink. Use a very soft (baby) toothbrush. This will avoid food collecting in your mouth which encourages infection and dental decay.
- Use fluoride toothpaste after any food or sugary drink intake. This will protect your teeth from decay. Although sugary supplements are important in maintaining your dietary requirements during treatment, they can increase the risk of decay if you do not care for your teeth.

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- Take salt water (saline) mouthwashes every 4 hours during the day (1 teaspoon of salt to 500mls of warm water). Use this mouthwash to rinse and spit. This will keep your mouth clean between brushing. You may be advised to increase these rinses to 1 hourly intervals, while your mouth is sore.
 - Use Chlorhexidine mouthwash (Corsydl) each morning and evening. This helps to reduce the bacteria in your mouth. If it becomes painful to use, then dilute it with water (50:50) until your mouth has improved.
 - Keep your mouth moist with sips of water.
 - Check the inside of your mouth daily for thrush infection. This will look like yellow or white dots on your tongue or gums. Report any findings to the radiotherapy staff.

To help with comfort for a Painful Mouth:

- Salt water (Saline mouthwashes) (see above)
- Sore lips may also be helped with aspirin mouthwashes(see below): use Vaseline, E45 or Aqueous cream on your lips to prevent dryness cracking or chapping.
- Painkilling branded mouthwashes (e.g. Difflam) may be useful but please check with nursing staff before using as some consultants prefer not to prescribe them. In some cases you will be advised to suck ice/ice lollies immediately prior to and during chemotherapy. This is to reduce damage from certain drugs.
- Always report any ongoing mouth soreness/pain. Your team will be able to provide other medications and mouthwashes to help.
- When your mouth becomes sore you can start to use dispersible aspirin as a mouthwash (**Please read below before starting this drug**). Use this to gargle.

Before taking aspirin, please ensure:

- You are not taking aspirin already (particularly in another preparation).
- You are not already taking the following drugs; Diclofenac, Voltarol, Ibrufen, Nurofen or Naproxen.
- You do not have a history of asthma or stomach ulcers/gastritis.

If the answer is yes to any of the above, you should seek medical advice before starting aspirin.

General Tips

- Avoid wearing any dentures or dental plates throughout your treatment. This will reduce any rubbing on the inside of your mouth.
- Avoid any acidic foods or drinks that make your mouth sting.

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- Avoid alcohol, especially spirits. These can worsen mouth soreness and pain
 - Avoid scratchy foods, such as crisps and toast.
 - If your voice becomes hoarse, try to limit speaking. Avoid smoky/dusty atmospheres, as this will further irritate your throat.
 - Avoid tobacco smoking during your treatment. It is also known to worsen the treatment reaction and soreness.
 - Use plenty of fluids, e.g. gravy, sauces, melted butter or margarine to keep foods moist.
 - Aim for small and frequent meals. Take something nourishing every 2 hours if you cannot tolerate large meals.
 - Have soft or cold foods.
 - Use a straw for drinking.

After treatment

Following treatment, it is important that you continue to maintain good oral and dental hygiene, as the radiotherapy treatment puts you at increased risk of dental decay if you do not take care of your teeth.

Radiotherapy weakens both the bone (including teeth) and the blood supply in the treatment area. In addition, saliva production, which helps to keep the mouth clean, is often reduced when salivary glands have been treated.

Both of these factors can increase the risk of infection and decay inside your mouth. This can become particularly serious if the treated jawbone becomes affected. Occasionally, this can lead to osteo-necrosis (permanent destruction of the bone).

In addition to good dental hygiene, it is important to keep regular 6 monthly check-ups with your dentist and hygienist. If you wear dentures please have these checked regularly, to ensure that they continue to fit well.

Please note that following Radiotherapy to the Mandible (jaw bone) any dental extractions will need to be performed under a maxillofacial team at the hospital.

If you require dental work or check-ups whilst receiving treatment, please check with a member of the head and neck oncology team before visiting the dentist. Following treatment, your dentist will be able to undertake any routine work in your mouth. However, it is important that you attend the hospital clinic if you need to have any teeth removed from an area of your mouth that has previously been treated with radiotherapy.

This document is also available in other languages, large print and audio format upon request – 01223 216032 or patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk

本文件也可應要求，製作成其他語文或特大字體版本，也可製作成錄音帶。
Cantonese

આ દસ્તાવેજ વિનંતી કરવાથી બીજી ભાષાઓ, મોટા છાપેલા અક્ષરો અથવા ઓડિઓ રચનામાં પણ મળી રહેશે.

Gujarati

A richiesta questo documento è anche disponibile in altre lingue, a caratteri grandi e in formato audio.

Italian

ئەم بەلگەییە ھەر ھەروەھا بە زمانەکانی کە، بە چاپی درشت و بە شریتی تەسجیل دەس دەکەوێت

Kurdish

درخواست پر یہ دستاویز دیگر زبانوں میں، بڑے حروف کی چھپائی اور سننے والے ذرائع پر بھی میسر ہے۔

Urdu



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