

Oral hygiene and mouth care advice for patients having radiotherapy or chemotherapy

Introduction

This leaflet provides information about oral hygiene and mouth care for patients having radiotherapy or chemotherapy treatment.

You may experience a dry or sore mouth or notice taste changes when you are having radiotherapy or chemotherapy treatment. These problems can be due to the treatment you are receiving.

It is very important that you tell your healthcare professional (nurse or radiographer) if you experience these changes as they may be able to recommend specific treatments for you. These symptoms might continue for some time after your treatment has finished but the suggestions in this leaflet may help to keep you comfortable.

Good mouth hygiene is essential.

Caphosol[®] oral rinse

This mouth rinse will be provided at the start of your radiotherapy treatment. Use 4 times a day to cleanse and refresh your mouth.

Dry mouth (xerostomia)

- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Sip drinks frequently to help moisten your mouth.
- Low calorie fizzy drinks can be refreshing, try tonic water or ginger ale.
- Suck sugar-free boiled sweets, jelly cubes or chew gum, to help stimulate saliva.
- Use extra sauces, gravy, custard or cream to moisten foods.
- Liquidised or softened foods may be easier to swallow.
- Crushed ice or ice lollies may help.

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Patient Information

- Prescribed artificial saliva products can be helpful.
- Gently brush your tongue with a soft tooth brush to help avoid coating.

Sore mouth (stomatitis) and ulcers

- Drink plenty of fluids. Try chilled or cold drinks.
- Jelly or ice cream may be soothing.
- Suck ice lollies, small pieces of frozen fruit or crushed ice cubes/chips to relieve soreness.
- Drinking through a straw can help.
- Avoid spicy food or acidic citrus drinks.
- Try warm or tepid drinks if cold one cannot be tolerated.
- Smoking and alcohol may irritate.
- Prescribed products are available to ease the soreness.

Infection

Candida (oral thrush) typically causes creamy white patches which look like 'cotton wool' or cottage cheese in your mouth and on your tongue. You will be prescribed medication to clear the infection. It is important that you take the whole course. The action of chewing and swallowing can help to clear plaques. Mouth care is important.

Taste changes

- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Cold or fizzy drinks may help to stimulate taste buds.
- The smell of foods you usually like can stimulate your appetite. Try to eat and drink foods that you normally would. Alternatively, trying different foods may appeal to your altered taste.
- Re-try foods in a week or so, as they may taste 'normal' again.
- Extra flavourings in food may help.
- Sucking sugar-free sweets may get rid of any unpleasant tastes.
- Using a microwave or non-metallic cookware and cutlery may help.

Patient Information

Important general advice

- Chewing pieces of fresh or tinned fruit, particularly pineapple and watermelon, may be helpful but avoid pineapple if your mouth is sore from the radiotherapy.
- Visit your dentist regularly.
- Avoid dehydration. Drink plenty of fluids; small amounts often may be easier.
- Regular mouthwashes will help. Use still water or a prescribed mouthwash solution. Some brands may be alcohol based and too harsh, so ask your healthcare professional for advice.
- Brush your teeth after every meal with a small headed soft toothbrush. We also suggest using a high fluoride toothpaste – please ask your specialist nurse for advice.
- If your dentures become loose, consult your dentist.
- Make sure that your dentures are cleaned and rinsed well every day. Soaking overnight in 50% Milton® Sterilising Fluid is essential to prevent infection.

Remember to always seek advice from a healthcare professional if symptoms continue.

Further information

Mouth Cancer Foundation

Website: www.mouthcancerfoundation.org

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Making a choice

Shared Decision Making

If you are asked to make a choice, you may have lots of questions that you want to ask. You may also want to talk over your options with your family or friends. It can help to write a list of the questions you want answered and take it to your appointment.



Ask 3 Questions

To begin with, try to make sure you get the answers to three key questions if you are asked to make a choice about your healthcare.

1. What are my options?
2. What are the pros and cons of each option for me?
3. How do I get support to help me make a decision that is right for me?

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* Ask 3 Questions is based on Shepherd HL, et al. Three questions that patients can ask to improve the quality of information physicians give about treatment options: A cross-over trial. Patient Education and Counselling, 2011;34:379-85



<https://aqua.nhs.uk/resources/shared-decision-making-case-studies/>