

Mouth care during chemotherapy

Some people having chemotherapy treatment find that their mouth gets very sore. This information gives some ideas about how you can look after your mouth before and during your chemotherapy treatment.

How chemotherapy affects the mouth

Chemotherapy drugs interfere with the way that the cells of the body divide and reproduce themselves. Both healthy cells and cancer cells are affected by chemotherapy drugs. Healthy cells can generally repair the damage caused by the chemotherapy, but cancer cells cannot and so they eventually die. When the healthy cells in the lining of the mouth are affected, this can lead to a number of side effects.

Soreness and ulceration of the mouth

Chemotherapy can cause the lining of the mouth to become very sore, and small ulcers may form. Soreness and ulceration of the lining of the mouth is known as mucositis and can be very painful.

Mouth infections

You are more likely to get an infection of the lining of your mouth if it becomes very sore and ulcerated, or if the number of white blood cells in your blood is reduced. Chemotherapy can temporarily reduce the number of white blood cells circulating in the blood. White blood cells play an important part in fighting infection, so for a while after having chemotherapy your resistance to infection may be reduced.

The most common mouth infection is a fungal infection called thrush (also known as candidiasis). Thrush usually appears as white patches, or a white coating, over the lining of the mouth and tongue. It is treated with anti-fungal medicines.

Dry mouth

Chemotherapy sometimes leads to a dry mouth.

Bleeding gums

Occasionally some bleeding or ulceration of the gums may develop.

Damage to the cells lining the mouth is usually temporary and most side effects will disappear once the treatment has finished and the number of white blood cells has returned to normal. The likelihood of developing a sore mouth varies from treatment to treatment and your doctors and nurses will be able to tell you how likely this will be with your particular type of chemotherapy.

How to keep your mouth healthy

You can do a lot to help to keep your mouth healthy. It is important to inspect your mouth daily for any signs of redness, swelling, sores, white patches or bleeding. Your nurse at the hospital can show you how to do this.

Helpful hints

- Clean your teeth or dentures gently every morning and evening, as well as after each meal.
- Use a soft-bristled or child's toothbrush. Toothbrush bristles can also be softened in hot water. An electric toothbrush can clean your teeth very effectively.
- Replace your toothbrush frequently to prevent problems with infection.
- If your toothpaste stings, or brushing your teeth makes you feel sick, try using a mouthwash (such as one teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda dissolved in a mug of warm water).
- If you have been sick, rinse out your mouth before cleaning your teeth as the acid in your vomit may damage your teeth.
- If your doctor prescribes a mouthwash for you, use it regularly as prescribed to prevent your mouth becoming sore.
- Sometimes, using a mouthwash over a long period of time may cause your teeth to discolor slightly. Let your doctor know if this happens to you. When you stop using the mouthwash, your teeth will return to their normal color.
- You can gently use dental tape or floss daily, but check with your doctor that the level of platelets in your blood is high enough. (A low platelet count can cause bleeding in the mouth even with very gentle flossing). You should not use a toothpick at all.
- Keep your lips moist by using Vaseline®, or a flavored lip balm if you prefer.
- Avoid neat spirits, tobacco, hot spices, garlic, onion, vinegar and salty food. These may irritate your mouth.
- Keep your mouth and food moist. Add gravies and sauces to your food to help swallowing.
- Some crunchy foods may damage your gums and should be avoided when your blood cell counts are low.
- Try to drink at least one and a half liters (three pints) of fluid a day – water, tea, weak coffee, and soft drinks such as apple juice.
- Avoid acidic drinks, such as orange and grapefruit juice. Warm herbal teas may be more soothing.
- Let your doctor know if you have mouth ulcers, as you may need medicines to help heal the ulcers and clear any infection.
- To keep your mouth fresh and moist, eat fresh pineapple chunks.