

Advice to Patients

The Care of the Mouth during Radiotherapy or Chemotherapy

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For your health and comfort we are smoke free. Staff, patients and visitors are kindly asked not to smoke on our premises or on visits.

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

Radiotherapy and chemotherapy can have harmful side effects in the mouth. Your oral health needs to be as good as possible before the start of treatment to avoid problems later.

Ensure that you have a thorough dental check-up, including advice, from a dentist or dental hygienist before 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 cancer treatment?

About two weeks after the start of 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 worst between two and five weeks after starting treatment after which they may gradually improve.

In this leaflet it is explained what can be done to help you cope with the unwanted effects of treatment.

Unwanted Effects of treatment	What happens?
Loss of taste	The taste buds are damaged by radiotherapy and chemotherapy.
Difficulty swallowing	Dryness and soreness of the mouth makes swallowing difficult.
Jaw stiffness	The muscles that move the jaw can become stiff as the result of the radiotherapy.
Dry mouth	Saliva moistens the mouth and protects against tooth decay and tooth sensitivity/erosive wear. Radiotherapy damages the glands which produce saliva. The dryness is worse during treatment. In some patients saliva may not return following radiotherapy.

What Can I do?	What to avoid?
<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.
<p>Rinse your mouth or gargle with Difflam, a pain-relieving mouthwash, before eating.</p> <p>Eat moist food and sip water frequently.</p>	Alcohol will increase mouth dryness.
<p>Gentle jaw exercises can be given to you.</p> <p>You may be given an appliance to help you.</p>	
<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 (Saliva Orthana).</p> <p>Flavourless salad oil or butter lubricates the lips and tongue and will help you to sleep at night.</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 the teeth or the mouth lining. Check with your doctor for alternatives.</p> <p>Avoid any sugary or acidic food and drink within 1 hour of bedtime.</p>

Unwanted Effects of treatment	What happens?
Sore mouth	Radiotherapy and chemotherapy can damage normal cells. The inside of the mouth, tongue and throat may become red, sore and ulcerated. You will find it uncomfortable to eat, speak, swallow and brush your teeth. The soreness may be due to a thrush infection.
Tooth decay	Saliva normally helps to protect the teeth. The absence of saliva encourages tooth decay.
Tooth erosion	Saliva protects teeth from the effects of acid from food/drink or associated with indigestion. Without saliva, teeth can wear and become sensitive if exposed to acid.

What Can I do?	What to avoid?
<p>Clean your teeth with a fluoride toothpaste and soft toothbrush if possible.</p> <p>Diffiam spray may be useful to relieve pain; use prior to 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>Brush your teeth regularly with a fluoride toothpaste.</p> <p>Drinking tea (without sugar) is good for your teeth.</p> <p>Always use a fluoride mouth wash or gel as directed by your dentist.</p> <p>Chew sugar free gum after a meal or snack.</p> <p>You should visit your dentist and hygienist regularly; three month check ups are recommended for 5 years post radiotherapy.</p>	<p>Food or drink containing even small amounts of sugar between meals or before bedtime are damaging to the teeth.</p> <p>Limit sweet food and drinks to meal times only and avoid added sugars where possible.</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 a fluoride rinse.</p>

Unwanted Effects of treatment	What happens?
Loss of weight	Mouth soreness, dryness and difficulty swallowing will reduce your appetite and enthusiasm for food.
Difficulty with dentures	Lack of saliva and mouth soreness makes dentures difficult to wear.

What Can I do?	What to avoid?
<p>Eat high energy food such as pasta, bread, yams and potatoes.</p> <p>It can be arranged for you to see a dietician if you are losing weight.</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 or toothpaste and a brush.</p> <p>Dentures should be left out at night for cleaning – soak in an appropriate cleanser for up to 20 minutes and afterwards keep the appliances dry.</p>	<p>Leaving your dentures out during cancer treatment can make them difficult to accommodate to when you need to use them later.</p> <p>If dentures are old/poorly fitting you will probably need new ones – but best to leave until 4-6 months after the end of radiotherapy.</p>

Notes

Useful Addresses

Cancer BACUP

3 Bath Place
Rivington Street
London
EC2A 3JR

Tel 0207 696 2003
Fax 0207 696 9002
www.cancerbacup.org.uk

British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

BACP House
35-37 Albert Street
Rugby

Warwickshire
CV21 2SG
Tel 0870 443 5252
Fax 0870 443 5161
www.bacp.co.uk

Let's Face It

Christine Piff
14 Fallowfield
Yateley
Hampshire
GU46 6LW

Tel 01252 879630
Fax 01252 872633
www.letsfaceit.force9.co.uk
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Mouth Cancer Foundation

www.mouthcancerfoundation.org.uk