Mouth Care

and

Cancer Treatment

Good mouth care is important before, during and after cancer treatment.

Having a healthy mouth can reduce your risk of the mouth problems that cancer and cancer treatment can cause.

See your Dentist as soon as possible after your cancer diagnosis, before you start your cancer treatment.
Mouth Care and Cancer Treatment

Why does cancer treatment cause mouth problems? ...........................................3
What mouth problems are caused by cancer treatment? .................................3
Do all cancer patients have the same risk of mouth problems? .........................4
When should I see my Dentist? ........................................................................4
What if I don’t have a Dentist? ........................................................................4
What if I don’t have dental insurance? ..............................................................5
How can I keep my mouth healthy during cancer treatment? .........................5
What if I have dentures? ..................................................................................6
What do I do if my mouth is sore? ....................................................................7
What do I do if my mouth is dry? ......................................................................7
Where can I learn more about mouth care and cancer treatment? ...............8
Why do cancer treatments cause mouth problems?
Cancer treatments slow or stop the growth of fast growing cells, like cancer cells. Normal cells in the lining of the mouth grow quickly, so cancer treatment can stop them from growing, too.

Cancer treatments upset the healthy balance of germs in the mouth. These changes may cause mouth sores, bleeding, infections and tooth decay.

Radiation therapy may damage tissues in the mouth, bone and salivary glands (the glands that keep your mouth wet).

What mouth problems are caused cancer treatment?
Some systemic therapy (also called chemo), head/neck radiation therapy and stem cell transplants (also called bone marrow transplants) can cause side effects in your mouth, during cancer treatment or for some time after treatment ends. Some side effects can be serious and can cause your Doctor to change or stop your cancer treatment.

Side effects include:
- Bleeding and swollen gums
- Burning, peeling, or swollen tongue
- Dry mouth
- Changes in taste
- Infection
- Jaw stiffness or bone loss
- Nerve damage
- Painful jaw, mouth or gums
- Thick or foamy saliva (spit)
- Tooth decay (cavities)
- Trouble eating, drinking, speaking or swallowing

Most side effects should improve 8 weeks after your cancer treatment ends. If your treatment ended more than 8 weeks ago and you still have mouth problems, tell your Doctor, Nurse or Dentist.

If you notice sores, bleeding or white patches in your mouth or a white coating on your tongue, tell your Doctor or Nurse, you may have an infection that needs to be treated right away.
Do all cancer patients have the same risk of mouth problems?

Your risk depends on how healthy your mouth is when you are diagnosed, the type of cancer you have, your cancer treatment and the drugs you take for your cancer and other health conditions.

- Head and neck cancer and stem cell transplant patients are at high risk for mouth problems
- Patients who are, or have in the past, taken drugs to improve bone health (such as Pamidronate, Zoledronic Acid or Denosumab) have an increased risk of gum and jaw problems (called osteonecrosis)
- Hematology and some stomach, colon and rectal cancer patients are generally at medium risk
- Patients being treated with chemo after surgery or radiation, palliative chemo, hormonal therapies or targeted therapies are generally at low risk

Ask your Doctor and Nurse to explain your risk of mouth problems and what you can do to prevent and manage these problems.

When should I see my Dentist?

See your Dentist as soon as possible after your cancer diagnosis, before you start your cancer treatment.

- Your Dentist will clean your teeth, treat any problems and decide if any teeth need to be removed
  - If you wear an orthodontic appliance (braces or a retainer) it may have to be removed
- Tell your Dentist about your cancer, the kind of cancer treatment you will have and when you are going to start your cancer treatment
- Tell your Dentist if you are taking drugs to improve bone health (such as Pamidronate, Zoledronic Acid or Denosumab)
- Ask your Dentist to show you the best ways to brush and floss your teeth
- Ask your dentist if you should use a daily fluoride rinse or gel to help prevent cavities
- Ask your Dentist how often you should have dental care after your cancer treatment is finished
- If you have head/neck cancer, your Cancer Doctor will arrange for you to see a special type of Dentist before your radiation treatment.

What if I don’t have a Dentist?

Tell your Cancer Doctor or Nurse if you do not have a Dentist. To find a Dentist, look in the Yellow Pages or visit www.canada411.ca.
What if I don’t have dental insurance?
Tell your Cancer Doctor or Nurse if you do not have dental insurance. They will try and help you get support for the dental care you need.
If you are a Nova Scotian head/neck cancer patient, most of the care given by the special Dentist involved in your cancer care will be covered by MSI. Ask this Dentist how much of your care is covered by MSI.

How can I keep my mouth healthy during cancer treatment?
While it may be painful, it is really important to take care of your mouth during and after cancer treatment.

- **Brush your teeth, tongue and gums after every meal and at bedtime**
  - Use an extra-soft toothbrush and brush gently with a fluoride toothpaste
  - Rinse your toothbrush well after each use, and store it in a dry place
  - After brushing, rinse, swish and spit with a salt and baking soda rinse (see page 6)
  - If your toothpaste hurts or burns your mouth, tell your Doctor, Nurse or Dentist

- **Gently floss your teeth at least once a day**
  - If you did not floss before your cancer diagnosis, now is not the time to start

- **It is common for your mouth to hurt or bleed when you brush and floss your teeth, don’t stop, be gentle and brush and floss as much as you can**
  - Tell your Doctor, Nurse or Dentist if you are having trouble brushing or flossing

- **Avoid using tobacco or drinking alcohol**
  - Talk to your Doctor, Nurse or Social Worker if you need help to stop using tobacco or alcohol

- **Avoid acidic, high-sugar drinks like pop, club soda or energy drinks**

- **Do not use toothpicks, they can cut your mouth**

- **Eat healthy meals and snacks**

- **Ask your Doctor if you should take a multi-vitamin**

- **If you are having head/neck radiation, ask your Speech Language Pathologist to show you exercises to help prevent and treat jaw stiffness**
Use this mouth rinse:

- Each morning, mix 1/2 teaspoon of baking soda and 1/2 teaspoon salt into 2 cups of warm water
- Rinse your mouth with the baking soda and salt mixture 6-8 times a day
- Follow with a rinse of plain warm water
- To protect your teeth, rinse your mouth with the salt and baking soda mixture after you throw up (vomit)
- Do not use mouthwashes that contain alcohol, they can dry and hurt your mouth

What if I wear dentures?

- Use the baking soda and salt mouth rinse
- Avoid using tobacco or drinking alcohol
  - Talk to your Doctor, Nurse or Social Worker if you need help to stop using tobacco or alcohol
- Avoid acidic, high-sugar drinks like pop, club soda or energy drinks.
- Eat healthy meals and snacks
- Ask your Doctor if you should take a multi-vitamin
- If you are having head/neck radiation, ask your Speech Language Pathologist to show you exercises to help prevent and treat jaw stiffness
- Be careful when putting in or taking out dentures or partial dentures
- If your dentures don’t fit well, have them adjusted before you start your treatment
- Remove, brush and rinse dentures after meals and at bedtime
  - Use a cleaner recommended by your Dentist
- Leave your dentures out as much as possible
  - Soak them in water with a 1/4 teaspoon of salt
- At bedtime, soak your dentures 100% white vinegar
  - Do not use a commercial denture soak
What do I do if my mouth is painful?

- Tell your Doctor, Nurse or Dentist if your mouth is sore, or if you are having trouble eating
  - They may suggest a drug or special rinse
- Ask your Doctor or Dietitian if you should take a food supplement (i.e. Boost®, Ensure®)
- Eat foods cold or at room temperature
  - Hot and warm foods can bother a sore mouth
- Choose soft foods, like ice cream, sherbet, milk shakes, baby food, soft fruits (like bananas and applesauce), mashed potatoes, cooked cereals, soft-boiled or scrambled eggs, cottage cheese, slices of cold cucumber, macaroni and cheese, custards, puddings, and Jell-O
- You also can put cooked food through the blender to make it easier to eat.
- Sip liquids with your meals
- Avoid spicy or salty foods
- Avoid acidic (sour) foods, such as tomatoes, citrus fruit (oranges, grapefruit or lemons) and fruit juice
- Avoid rough, coarse and dry foods like raw vegetables, pretzels, nachos, granola, popcorn, nuts, chips and toast
- Avoid using tobacco or drinking alcohol
- Avoid acidic, high-sugar drinks like pop, club soda or energy drinks

What do I do if my mouth is dry?

- Tell your Cancer Doctor, Nurse or Dentist if your mouth is dry
  - They may suggest using artificial saliva (spit)
- Avoid glycerin or lemon-glycerin swabs, they dry the mouth
- Drink at least 8 cups of water every day
- Suck on ice chips, popsicles or sugarless candy
- Chew sugarless gum
- Moisten dry foods with butter, margarine, gravy, sauces, or broth
- Dip crisp, dry foods in mild liquids
- Eat soft and mashed foods
- Use a cool mist humidifier in your main living area and your bedroom
- Use a lip balm that will dissolve in water (like K-Y® jelly)
  - Do not use petroleum jelly or Vaseline®
Where can I learn more about mouth care during cancer treatment?

- Ask your Cancer Care Team any questions you have about taking care of your mouth during cancer treatment
- Visit [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov) and read “The Oral Complications of Chemotherapy and Head/Neck Radiation”
- Visit [www.cancercare.on.ca](http://www.cancercare.on.ca) and read “Oral Care Symptom Management Guidelines”
- Visit Support for People with Oral and Head and Neck Cancer [www.spohnc.org](http://www.spohnc.org)

This information does not take the place of the care and advice of your cancer care team. Talk to your Cancer Care Team about your health concerns and any questions you have about your cancer treatment.

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