



Chris O'Brien Lifehouse

# Head and Neck Oncology Mouth Care



Cancer treatments such as chemotherapy and radiation therapy often cause side effects. For people living with head and neck cancers, these treatments may cause changes to your mouth, throat and teeth.

Radiation therapy can reduce the amount of saliva produced. Saliva keeps the mouth clean and helps prevent infection. It also protects your teeth. A lack of saliva can increase the risk of tooth decay, tooth wear, fungal infections and gum disease.

During and following treatment your mouth needs extra care and attention. Keeping your mouth clean helps reduce the risk of mouth sores, infections and dryness. Good mouth care also helps keep your mouth healthy and comfortable.

## BEFORE TREATMENT

### Seeing your dentist

Your oral health needs to be as good as possible before the start of treatment to avoid problems later. You should have a dental check-up before your treatment begins. You may need to have some dental procedures before treatment starts.

## DURING TREATMENT

### What can I expect during treatment?

Within three weeks of starting radiotherapy, you may notice mouth dryness, ulcers and discomfort. You may also experience change or loss of taste. These changes may make eating and drinking difficult.

These mouth symptoms can gradually worsen as treatment progresses. They should begin to improve several weeks after treatment.

## Dry mouth

### What causes a dry mouth?

When there is not enough saliva, the mouth gets dry and uncomfortable. This condition is called xerostomia (dry mouth). When a person has a dry mouth, the risk of tooth decay, tooth wear, gum disease and infection increases.

## What can I do to moisten my mouth?

- Always keep a bottle of water or spray bottle handy to help moisten your mouth and throat.
- Suck on ice cubes.
- Apply petroleum jelly or balm on your lips.
- Keep water at your bedside at night and sip it regularly if you frequently wake with a dry mouth.
- Products such as **Biotene Oral Balance Moisturising Gel** (available over the counter) or **GC Dry Mouth Gel** (dentist only product) may reduce dryness overnight.
- Use saliva substitutes to coat your mouth, for example **Oralube Saliva Substitute** or **Hamilton Aquae Dry Mouth Spray**.

## How long will my dry mouth last?

Most patients experience dry mouth during and after treatment. For some patients a dry mouth may be a permanent side effect of radiotherapy if the salivary glands do not recover fully after treatment. Recovery from dry mouth may take months or even one to two years.

## Mouthwash

### **Why should I use mouthwashes?**

Mouthwashes can help to keep your mouth clean and reduce sores and infections. Treatment can cause thick, stringy saliva which can make your mouth dry and uncomfortable. Talking and swallowing is difficult if your mouth is full of thick saliva. A mouthwash can help clear this.

There are different mouthwashes you can use:

1. mouthwashes you make yourself with sodium bicarbonate provided during your treatment
2. over the counter products from your supermarket/chemist
3. prescribed products.

**We recommend using sodium bicarbonate.** Please ask your dentist or doctor before buying a mouthwash. Mouthwashes that do not contain alcohol are recommended. Alcohol can dry and irritate your mouth.

### **How to make homemade mouthwash**

Dissolve two teaspoons of sodium bicarbonate in 500ml of lukewarm water, stir well and allow to cool. The mouthwash is now ready to use. Homemade mouthwash can be kept for 24 hours.

## How to use mouthwashes

1. Rinse your mouth and gargle with the mouthwash.
2. Spit out the mouthwash.
3. Repeat if necessary.

## How often should I use mouthwashes?

Start by using your mouthwash when you wake up, after each meal and before going to bed at night. You might like to use it more frequently as treatment progresses.

## Oral thrush

Oral thrush is also common during treatment. If you have been diagnosed with oral thrush, follow the recommendations given to you and continue mouthwashes.



## Dental care

### **How to clean your gums and teeth**

If your mouth is sore, clean your gums and /or teeth with a soft child's toothbrush to avoid damaging your gums and whichever toothpaste your dentist advises.

### **Denture care**

If you have dentures, remove them and clean after eating and before going to sleep. Use fragrance-free, warm, soapy water and a firm brush to clean your dentures. If you have oral thrush, soak your dentures as advised by your dentist. If your mouth becomes too sore, you may not be able to wear your dentures.

### **Speak to your dentist or medical team**

You should let your dentist, nurse or doctor know if you have any changes in your mouth, such as:

- swelling
- pain
- cracked skin
- ulcers
- redness.

## AFTER TREATMENT

### **What about after treatment?**

After treatment you should continue good dental care as recommended by your dentist. You may need to use the mouthwash even after your treatment has finished and continue to see a dentist regularly long-term.

It is important that any dentist you see in the future is aware of your history of radiotherapy to ensure that you receive the most appropriate and safest dental care.

Special precautions may be required should you need any teeth removed so please discuss with your medical team and/or dentist.

### **For more information**

Ask your dentist, nurse, doctor or speech pathologist if you have questions about mouth care or the best mouthwash for you to use.

# Quick reference guide

<b>Side effect</b>	<b>What happens?</b>
<b>Difficulty with dentures</b>	Lack of saliva and mouth soreness makes dentures difficult to wear.
<b>Dry mouth</b>	Saliva moistens the mouth and protects against tooth decay and tooth sensitivity. Radiation damages the glands which produce saliva. The dryness is worse during treatment but slowly improves. Saliva may not return completely.
<b>Jaw stiffness</b>	The muscles that move the jaw can become stiff because of radiotherapy.
<b>Loss of taste</b>	The taste buds are damaged by chemotherapy and radiotherapy.
<b>Loss of weight</b>	Mouth soreness, dryness and difficulty swallowing may reduce your appetite and enthusiasm for food.
<b>Sore mouth</b>	Radiation and chemotherapy damage normal cells. The lining of the mouth, tongue and throat may become red, sore and ulcerated. You may find it uncomfortable to eat, speak, swallow or brush your teeth. The soreness may be due to an oral thrush infection.

What can I do?	What to avoid?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See your dentist if your dentures are painful.</li> <li>• Clean your dentures carefully after each meal, at least twice daily.</li> <li>• Clean your dentures with alcohol-free chlorhexidine mouthwash or toothpaste and a brush.</li> <li>• Take your dentures out at night time.</li> <li>• Soak in an appropriate cleanser overnight.</li> <li>• Have your dentures assessed before radiotherapy to fix any problems.</li> </ul>	<p>Leaving your dentures out all day during your cancer treatment can make them difficult to accommodate when you need to use them later.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sip water frequently.</li> <li>• Chew sugar-free gum.</li> <li>• Discuss saliva substitutes with your dentist.</li> <li>• Oral gel may help to lubricate your lips and tongue and will help you to sleep at night.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fizzy drinks, diet drinks and fruit juice are acidic and will make your teeth sensitive. They will also cause permanent loss of tooth surface. Try and avoid food or drinks containing sugar between meals.</li> <li>• Avoid acidic foods.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work through the gentle jaw exercises given to you by your care team.</li> <li>• You may be given an appliance to help you.</li> </ul>	
<p>Unfortunately there is little you can do. Taste will return. As it does you will notice an unpleasant taste for a period of time but this will improve.</p>	<p>Avoid sweet food or drinks as they will cause rapid tooth decay particularly if taken between meals or before bedtime.</p>
<p>Foods that are high in energy and protein are more nourishing when you have a poor appetite or are not eating well due to side-effects of treatment. Your medical team will arrange for you to see a dietitian if you are losing weight.</p>	<p>Unplanned weight loss can affect treatment and slow your recovery. Before starting any diet or food avoidance, talk with your nurse or doctor.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clean your teeth with a fluoride toothpaste and soft toothbrush.</li> <li>• Use a mouthwash.</li> <li>• Tell your nurse or doctor if you have a sore mouth.</li> <li>• You may need medication if you have oral thrush.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hard food, spicy food and hot drinks will be painful.</li> <li>• Avoid alcohol or tobacco; they will make your mouth feel worse.</li> <li>• Strongly flavoured toothpaste or mouthwash will be uncomfortable to use and should be avoided.</li> </ul>

## Other recommendations

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## Useful contacts

Dentist: \_\_\_\_\_

Nurse consultant: \_\_\_\_\_

Speech pathologist: \_\_\_\_\_

**BEYOND  FIVE**

The Face of Head & Neck Cancer

*This brochure has been developed by the Head and Neck Department at Chris O'Brien Lifehouse and the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital Oral Health Clinic in conjunction with Beyond Five. We acknowledge information gathered from the Speech Pathology Department at the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Queensland. We also thank the Ford Foundation for funding support.*









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