

Caring for your teeth and gums during cancer treatment



Tips for comfort and healing

Cancer treatments are hard on the entire body, and that includes your mouth. By seeing a dentist and practicing good dental care, you can reduce problems that arise and are often caused by chemotherapy and radiation. When possible, see your dentist for a checkup prior to cancer treatments.

What happens to the mouth as a result of cancer treatments

Chemotherapy and radiation treatments, particularly to the head and neck, can produce a number of side effects. Some of these conditions may only occur during treatment while others can be long lasting or permanent. Don't wait to receive treatment if you experience any of the following:

- Bleeding and/or swelling of the gums
- Pain of the teeth or gums
- Increase in cavities or other oral infections
- Long-term dryness of your mouth
- Stiffness of the oral muscles
- Poor appetite and difficulty swallowing
- Changes in your ability to taste

If possible, visit your dentist before your treatment begins.

Your dentist will check your gums, teeth, and soft tissue of your face. Having a dental checkup can help decrease future side effects of your cancer treatment. You and your dentist can also discuss your cancer diagnosis, cancer treatment plan and other dental concerns that you might have. You may want to give your dentist the name of your cancer doctor (oncologist) so they can discuss your treatment needs.

Dental problems discovered during your checkup should be fixed, with enough time allowed for healing, before treatment begins:

- If you need oral surgery, it should be performed at least two weeks before cancer treatment.
- Teeth that can't be filled or repaired should be extracted.
- Remove any orthodontic devices.
- For children receiving cancer treatment, parents should consider removing 'baby' teeth that will fall out during the time treatment will be received.

Tips for caring for your teeth, gums and mouth:

When you're receiving cancer treatment, make daily oral care a habit.

- Brush teeth, gums and tongue twice daily with an extra-soft toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste
- Floss gently every day
- Use fluoride toothpaste and a non-alcoholic mouthwash to minimize tooth decay
- Rinse your mouth several times a day with a baking soda and salt solution, followed by a plain water rinse (if your mouth tissue has sores or is badly swollen, don't add the salt).
- Keep your mouth moist by drinking water, sucking on ice chips and using sugarless gum or sugarless hard candy.
- Exercise your jaw muscles three times a day to prevent or treat jaw stiffness
- Eat healthy foods recommended by your medical doctor and avoid candy, gum and soda unless they are sugar-free.
- Avoid spicy foods, toothpicks, tobacco and alcohol

If problems develop in your mouth, talk to your dentist and oncologist. With their help, you can stay more comfortable while you complete your treatment program.



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