

Managing Mouth or Throat Changes

DEFINITION/CAUSES

Some types of chemotherapy and radiation can harm fast-growing cells, such as those that line your mouth, throat and lips. This can affect your teeth, gums, the lining of your mouth/throat and the glands that make saliva. If you have a sore mouth, gums or throat, check with your doctor to be sure that it is a treatment side effect and not an unrelated dental problem. Mouth and throat problems may include any of the following:

- Dry mouth (caused by having little or no saliva)
- Changes in taste and smell (such as foods tasting like metal or chalk or having no taste at all, smells unfamiliar to you)
- Infection of your gums, teeth or tongue
- Higher sensitivity to hot or cold foods
- Sores on lips or in mouth
- Problems eating, swallowing and drinking due to mouth/throat sores

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- At least two weeks before you start chemotherapy or radiation, visit a dentist. If you cannot go to the dentist before treatment, ask your doctor or nurse when it is safe to go. Be sure to tell your dentist that you are being treated for cancer and what your treatment plan is.
- Check your mouth and tongue each day so you can see or feel problems, such as mouth sores or white patch infections, as soon as they start. Tell your doctor or nurse about such problems right away as you may need medications to treat the problem.
- Keep your mouth and lips moist. You can do this by sipping water throughout the day, sucking on ice chips or sugar free hard candy, or chewing sugar free gum. Ask your doctor or nurse for a saliva substitute if your mouth is always dry.
- Brush your teeth, gums and tongue gently after each meal, when you wake up and before bedtime. Use a soft toothbrush. If brushing is painful, you can use cotton swabs or a toothette (stick with a sponge on the tip) and use a fluoride mouthwash.
- Rinse your mouth with alcohol free mouthwashes or use a solution of 1/4 teaspoon baking soda and 1/8 teaspoon of salt in one cup of warm water. Do this three to four times per day.

- Gently floss your teeth daily. If your gums bleed or hurt, do not floss those areas. Ask your doctor or nurse about flossing if your platelet count is low, as you are at risk for bleeding.
- If you wear dentures, make sure they fit well, and keep them clean.
- If your mouth is sore — be careful what you eat. Choose foods that are moist and easy to chew and swallow, such as pureed or mashed vegetables, scrambled eggs, macaroni and cheese, oatmeal and other cooked cereals, bananas, applesauce, custard, pudding, gelatin, cottage cheese, yogurt and milkshakes.
- Take small bites of food, chew slowly and sip liquids between bites.
- Eat smaller, more frequent meals.
- Suck on ice chips or popsicles to lessen mouth pain.
- Soften foods with gravy, sauces, broth, yogurt or liquids.
- Eat foods that are cool or at room temperature; warm or hot foods may hurt your mouth or throat.
- Stay away from foods that can hurt, scrape or burn your mouth.
- Avoid sharp or crunchy foods, such as crackers, chips or raw veggies.
- Spicy foods, such as curry dishes, salsa and citrus fruits, may also burn. Avoid grapefruit juice, tart lemonade, beer and wine.
- Avoid foods and drinks with high sugar (candy/soda) because they lead to cavities.
- Do not smoke or use tobacco products (such as cigarettes, pipes, chewing tobacco, cigars, etc.) as they may dry out the mouth.
- Use a straw or small spoon to drink liquids.

WHEN TO CALL THE DOCTOR

Tell your doctor or nurse immediately if you notice mouth, gum or throat sores, especially after your chemotherapy.