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Your Oral Health During Head and Neck Cancer Treatment

Chemotherapy or radiation treatment for head and neck cancer can affect your mouth in many ways. Dry mouth, sores, an increase in tooth decay (cavities), a loss of taste, and oral infections are common side effects. If you are scheduled for chemotherapy or radiation treatment, make sure you visit your dentist to treat any conditions that may become worse or painful during and after cancer treatment. With good home care and guidance from your dental team, many of the side effects of cancer treatment can be managed. Eating, smiling, talking, and being pain-free are all important for the healing process.

Dry Mouth

The saliva is a natural protector for the teeth and gums and provides a lubricant for the soft parts of the mouth, including the tongue and cheeks. It is necessary for comfort, during talking, and while chewing. Saliva comes out of several glands in the mouth and may become damaged during chemotherapy or radiation treatment. If the amount of saliva is decreased, the mouth will become dry and small injuries, which happen with even normal use, take longer to heal. With decreased saliva flow, the chance for cavities also increases significantly, especially at the roots of the teeth, because saliva helps to cleanse the mouth after eating and drinking.

Here are a few tips to aid with dry mouth:

- Drink plain tap water all day.
- Chew sugar-free gum or sugar-free candies.
- Use products aimed at the dry mouth (brands like Biotene, Therabreath, Act, Oral B).
 - Sprays, lozenges, gums
- Avoid alcohol-based mouth rinses. These rinses may burn tissue in the mouth and increase the drying effect.

Mouth Sores/Oral Infections

Mouth sores may also occur during head and neck cancer treatment. Consult with your dental team if you develop any redness or open sores that last more than 10-14 days. Prescription or over-the-counter creams may reduce the pain caused by the sores. Infections, like thrush, may appear. Thrush is a yeast infection that requires prescription medication to heal.

Tooth Decay

Decreased saliva flow, nausea, and vomiting can significantly increase the chance of tooth decay. Good home care with thorough brushing and flossing is the first step to counter this problem. Your dentist may recommend a prescription-strength fluoride rinse or gel for added protection. It is also important to reduce sugar consumption and limit snacking during cancer treatment.

What You Can Do

- ✓ Don't smoke. If you smoke, quit.
- ✓ Don't use smokeless tobacco products.
- ✓ Limit the amount of alcohol you drink.
- ✓ Before, during, and after undergoing cancer therapy, consult with your dental team on how to decrease the likelihood of cancer treatment side effects.
- ✓ Make your dentist part of your treatment team.
- ✓ Attend follow-up appointments for early detection if cancer comes back.
- ✓ Eat healthily, be active, and maintain a healthy weight.
- ✓ Protect your loved ones – prevent six cancers by getting the HPV vaccine.

Resources

American Cancer Society

<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/oral-cavity-and-oropharyngeal-cancer/treating.html>

American Dental Association

<https://www.mouthhealthy.org/en/az-topics/c/cancer-during-treatment>

National Cancer Institute

<https://www.cancer.gov/types/head-and-neck/patient/adult/lip-mouth-treatment-pdq>