

How to Manage your Mouth Problems

What is cancer-related mouth problems?

The most common mouth problems for people with cancer are:

- Dry mouth and lips
- Mouth sores
- Cold sores
- Sticky saliva
- Taste changes
- Trouble or pain with swallowing
- Too much saliva (spit)
- Tooth or gum problems
- A stiff jaw
- Bad breath
- Burning mouth
- Feeling thirsty all the time



If you notice changes in your swallowing, like gagging or choking on food, ask for a referral to a speech language pathologist right away.

What causes cancer-related mouth problems?

- Cancer itself
- Cancer treatments
- Not taking care of your mouth before cancer
- Nausea and vomiting
- Smoking, alcohol or drug use
- Other medical problems
- Dehydration
- Medications
- Poor diet
- Bone marrow transplants

What can I do to help my mouth problems?

Go to the dentist

Tell your dentist that you are having cancer treatments so that they can get any special instructions from your cancer care team. This is especially important if you have head and neck cancer or if you are on active chemotherapy.

Keep your mouth clean

Keep your teeth, gums, and mouth as clean as you can while you are getting cancer treatments. You should brush and floss your teeth often to avoid infections. Ask your health care team about medicines that can numb your mouth to make it more comfortable.

Floss your teeth

If you already floss, keep flossing at least once a day. Do not start flossing if you have never flossed before. Tell your health care team if your gums bleed for longer than two minutes after brushing or flossing.

Rinse your mouth

Rinse your mouth with your homemade mouth rinse every 1-2 hours if your mouth is dry or sore. Otherwise, rinse 4-5 times a day and right after eating meals or snacks. Do not use mouthwash with alcohol (like Scope or Listerine). They can dry out your mouth.

Homemade Mouth Rinse

Mix together in a clean jug or jar:

- 1 teaspoon of salt
- 1 teaspoon of baking soda
- 4 cups of water

Keep your mouth rinse at room temperature and make a fresh batch every day.

Brush your teeth

Brush your teeth, gums, and tongue after eating and before bed. Use a small, soft, rounded-end, bristled toothbrush. If your mouth is sore, run hot water over your toothbrush to soften the bristles before brushing.

Keep your mouth and lips moist

Use your homemade mouth rinse or suck on sugar-free lozenges to keep your mouth moist. Ask your doctor if an artificial saliva (spit) product is right for you (like Salagen). Keep your lips moist with animal or plant based lip balms with bees-wax, lanolin or cocoa butter. Do not use petroleum based lip balm.

Change your diet

You may only be able to eat a few bites at a time, so choose calorie and protein rich food and drinks. To keep your strength, you need to keep eating even when it is painful. If eating is painful, ask your health care team to help you time your pain medication so it starts working before meals. This might make it easier to eat.

Quit smoking

Smoking can make your mouth problems worse. Your pharmacist or family doctor can help you make a plan to quit smoking. They can suggest nicotine replacements (like the patch or gum), prescribe medication to help you quit, and help you track your progress.

When should I talk to my health care team?

Tell your health care team right away if you have any of these symptoms:

- A fever of 38.3° C (100.9° F) or higher at any time or 38° C (100.4° F) or higher for at least one hour
- Strong pain in your mouth or jaw
- Swelling, numbness or heaviness in the jaw
- Trouble with swallowing
- A choking feeling
- White patches or red/swollen areas in your mouth
- If you are not coping well with pain



For more information, talk to your health care team or visit www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms