



Coping With Sore Mouth/Dry Mouth/Mouth Infections

CANCER SOCIETY - BRIEF FACTS

A sore mouth or dry mouth and mouth infections are common problems for people having treatment for cancer.

Early recognition and management of symptoms and early treatment of any resulting infections can significantly improve sore mouths and dry mouths.

Sore Mouth

A sore mouth is often referred to as *mucositis* or less commonly, *stomatitis*

Causes

- Chemotherapy: A sore mouth may be a direct effect of some chemotherapy drugs. The mouth and digestive tract are composed of cells (mucosa) that are more sensitive to chemotherapy. Some chemotherapy drugs are more likely than others to cause this problem – check with your cancer doctor or oncology nurse about your particular drug regime. If you are having chemotherapy you will be more prone to developing mouth ulcers (sore and broken areas inside the mouth) and infections in the mouth – these will further aggravate a sore mouth (see later section). The effects of chemotherapy on the mouth usually clear up within 4-6 weeks after finishing treatment.
- Radiation therapy to the head and neck region.
- Other causes can include the cancer itself if it is sited in the mouth area, or the use of some medications such as steroids and antibiotics can cause a tendency to develop mouth ulcers and/or infections.

Before commencing a course of chemotherapy any existing dental problems should be treated if possible. This is essential for anyone having radiation therapy to the head and neck region.

Early Symptoms

Often a burning sensation and/or redness, a feeling of roughness or shininess of the gums or mouth, followed by the appearance of ulcers. Fungal infections (thrush) may occur – these can be seen as white or yellow patches inside the mouth. Contact your oncology nurse or doctor as soon as you notice any symptoms. They will arrange for any medication if needed and they will regularly assess your mouth.

Coping with a Sore Mouth

Follow the recommendations of your oncology nurse or doctor for the care of your mouth. Don't buy over-the-counter mouthwashes – these often contain alcohol, which will dry your mouth. Minimise further irritation and inflammation of delicate mouth tissue by:

- **Practising good oral hygiene.** Keep teeth and gums clean by using a soft (preferably baby) toothbrush or sponge. Wetting your toothbrush in warm water will soften the bristles even more. A

hard brush can tear the soft tissue of the gums and infection can more easily get in. If using dental floss, be very gentle. Always report bleeding from the gums, or mouth in general, to your cancer doctor or oncology nurse, as this may indicate that your platelet count is low. As soon as you can resume using a toothbrush, do so as this is the most effective tool to fight tooth decay. Use fluoride toothpaste to strengthen the teeth. If you can't tolerate toothpaste as treatment progresses, a good substitute is a thick paste of bicarbonate of soda (baking soda) and salt and a few drops of warm water. Apply with a toothbrush, using a pat and push technique, around the teeth. Use baking soda mouth rinses frequently during the day, after food, and before going to sleep at night (use 1 teaspoon of baking soda mixed in a glass of warm water). Follow with a plain water rinse. Baking soda is an effective cleanser, promotes healing and reduces the acidity in your mouth which can accelerate tooth decay.

- **Controlling the pain.** Medication to relieve pain may be needed – discuss all pain issues early with your doctor or oncology nurse. Let them know if it is not effective.
- Avoiding alcohol and tobacco.
- Avoiding very spicy, or salty foods, acidic food or drink, e.g. raw tomatoes, citrus fruit and citrus juice, or very rough and coarse foods, e.g. toast, raw vegetables
- Trying blackcurrant or rosehip syrup, apple juice, peach or pear nectar (less acidic than citrus juices) or herbal teas
- Avoiding foods at very hot or very cold temperatures
- Eating food with a soft or smooth texture, e.g. yoghurt, milkshakes, mashed potatoes or taro, scrambled eggs, jelly. Use a blender if possible to purée foods.
- Having some tins of baby food on hand for a quick, nutritious snack.
- Eating a little fresh pineapple. This contains an enzyme that helps to clean your mouth. Make sure it is ripe.
- Trying to drink 1.5–2 litres of fluid daily – a moist mouth is less likely to get sore.
- Trying drinking through a straw to deliver liquids away from sore areas.
- If dentures are worn, leaving them out at night (soak in a denture-cleaning solution), and for periods during the day. If you are having radiation therapy to the head and neck region you will need to leave dentures out until several weeks after treatment finishes.

Dry Mouth

Causes

- Radiation therapy to the head and neck area – the severity is related to the dose and duration of



treatment. When major salivary glands are in the radiation field, dry mouth problems may well persist for months or years, and there might not be a full recovery.

- Some chemotherapy drugs cause a dry mouth by temporarily decreasing the amount of saliva you produce – this usually clears up 6–8 weeks after treatment finishes.
- Additional medications such as anti-nausea or pain medications can dry the mouth.
- Dehydration due to vomiting or poor nutrition.

Coping with a Dry Mouth

- ❖ **Practise effective oral hygiene** (see “Coping with a Sore Mouth” above). As saliva helps to clean your mouth and prevent plaque build-up and decay, good care of your mouth and teeth is vital when saliva production is reduced.
- ❖ Report any vomiting or inability to drink adequate fluids to your cancer care team. Ideal daily fluid intake is 1.5–2 litres daily.
- ❖ Sip liquids with meals.
- ❖ Discuss the use of liquid food supplements with your cancer doctor, oncology or dietician – these can be obtained on prescription.
- ❖ Add sauces or gravy to dry foods.
- ❖ Dip biscuits in warm drinks to soften them.
- ❖ Avoid chocolate and pastry as they tend to stick to the roof of your mouth.
- ❖ Avoid tobacco, alcohol and commercial mouth-washes – these can all further irritate and dry your mouth.
- ❖ Use a saliva substitute. Biotene Oral Balance Gel is available for purchase from pharmacies at \$17.00.
- ❖ Try sugar-free gum or sweets, and tart foods such as lemon to stimulate saliva production.
- ❖ Use a humidifier, especially at night.
- ❖ Carry a small spray bottle filled with water to squirt into your mouth frequently during the day.
- ❖ Keep lips moist with lanolin especially at night to prevent mouth dryness associated with mouth breathing. For very dry lips, try KY Jelly applied 2- to 4-hourly to relieve chapped, ulcerated lips, or use a product such as Blistex – ask your oncology nurse/pharmacist for advice.
- ❖ Suck ice chips slowly to relieve pain and as a saliva substitute. Ice chips have been shown in studies to reduce the mouth side effects of 5FU chemotherapy when taken at the time of treatment (ask your cancer care team for advice).
- ❖ Milk of Magnesia may provide relief by providing a protective coating on the tissue of the mouth.

- ❖ Thick, sticky saliva may be a problem too, especially on waking – rinsing your mouth before eating will thin saliva. Foods to try for this problem include thin, hot cereals or broth-based soups, fruit ice-blocks, warm lemonade, melon, blended and diluted vegetables or fruit.

Mouth Infections

Causes

- Mouth infections can result from irritated, painful and broken areas in the mouth tissue.
- Chemotherapy – immune system impairment reduces resistance to infection.
- Radiation therapy to the head and neck region – direct damage to the oral mucosa.

Common Types of Infection

- Candida (oral thrush)
- Herpes virus (cold sores)
- Bacteria

Coping with a Mouth Infection

Aim to prevent major problems where possible by

- ❑ **Good oral hygiene** (see “Coping with a Sore Mouth” overleaf).
- ❑ **Early treatment.** Examine your mouth daily for early signs of infection (redness, shininess of gums, white patches inside the mouth, coated tongue, mouth odour, burning sensation). Use recommended medication as directed and report its effectiveness to your cancer care team. Treatment of oral thrush is often with an antifungal solution – another way to take this is to measure out your dose and freeze in ice-block trays, for soothing coolness and comfort for your mouth tissues.
- ❑ **Avoid mouth irritation** (see suggestions for “Coping with a Sore Mouth” and “Coping With a Dry Mouth” above).

The Cancer Society of New Zealand is a non-profit organisation whose mission is “to minimise the impact of cancer on our community”. The Cancer Society’s Support & Information Service assists people with cancer and family members through one-to-one counselling, support, educational programmes, such as LIVING WITH CANCER and CANSUPPORT, telephone contact, guidance, information and referrals to appropriate services. The Cancer Society also offers assistance with transport to treatment for those who require it, CANTALK newsletter and a specialist library and information service. There is a specialist nurse for patient information who can guide you - email: info@cancersoc.org.nz

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