

Free Prescriptions

All cancer patients undergoing treatment for cancer, the effects of cancer or the effects of cancer treatment can apply for an exemption certificate for a free prescription from their GP.

How can I help reduce healthcare associated infections?

Infection control is important to the well-being of our patients and for that reason we have infection control procedures in place. Keeping your hands clean is an effective way of preventing the spread of infections. We ask that you, and anyone visiting you, use the hand sanitiser available at the entrance to every ward before coming in to or after leaving the ward. In some situations hands may need to be washed at the sink using soap and water rather than using the hand sanitiser. Staff will let you know if this is the case.

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Mouth Care for Patients Undergoing Cancer Treatment

Patient information leaflet

If you require a translation or an alternative format of this leaflet please ask for assistance

Safe & compassionate care,

every time

Introduction

Cancer treatment may cause your mouth to become sore and dry which increases the risk of acquiring mouth infections or dental problems. For many people these problems are mild and resolve within a few weeks after treatment has ended, but for some they can make eating difficult or even delay treatment.

Reducing the risk of problems occurring

- Before starting treatment ideally visit your dentist for a check-up and have any necessary dental procedures completed before starting cancer treatment
- Ask your dentist for advice on looking after your mouth
- Avoid mouthwashes containing the following as they can cause irritation:
 - Alcohol
 - Sodium bicarbonate
 - Hydrogen Peroxide
 - Glycerine
 - Lemon
- Clean your mouth at least 3 times a day, the brush before bed is particularly important
- Use a soft toothbrush (for sensitive teeth)
- Use fluoride toothpaste containing at least 1350 parts per million (ppm) of fluoride

Chlorhexidine Gluconate products (mouthwashes or dental gels) have anti-fungal properties and are available to purchase over the counter. However, these products interact with anti-fungal medicines and stop them both from working so they should not be used at the same time. Allow at least a 30 minute gap between taking them.

Prevention

- In a sore, dry mouth sugary foods or drinks can promote fungal growth so rinse your mouth with water after meals
- Clean your teeth at least 3 times a day, Brushing before bedtime is particularly important so your mouth is clean through the night
- Use a soft toothbrush (designed for sensitive teeth) and fluoride toothpaste containing at least 1350ppm of fluoride
- Remove your dentures every night, cleaning them with paste or soap and water before soaking them in a solution of water and a denture-cleaning tablet
- Brush your gums, tongue and inside your mouth with a soft brush twice a day even if you wear dentures or have no natural teeth
- If you are diabetic, try to keep your glucose levels controlled.

Other factors that affect how likely you are to develop infections in your mouth during your treatment include your general health and how healthy your teeth and gums are before you start your treatment.

Oral thrush

This is a fungal non contagious infection of the mouth. It is also called oral candidosis (or candidiasis) because it is caused by a group of yeasts or fungi called Candida.

Symptoms

- White patches in the mouth that can often be wiped off, leaving behind red areas that may bleed slightly
- Loss of taste or an unpleasant taste in the mouth
- Redness inside the mouth and throat
- Cracks at the corners of the mouth
- A painful, burning sensation in the mouth which in some cases can make eating and drinking difficult

Speak to your medical team if you develop symptoms. In severe cases that are left untreated, there is a risk of the infection spreading further into your body, which can be serious.

Treatment

Oral thrush is treated with antifungal medicines. These usually come in the form of gels or a liquid that you apply directly inside your mouth, but tablets or capsules are also sometimes used. Ensure that you finish the course even if symptoms improve.

- Do not rinse your mouth after brushing in order to keep the fluoride on your teeth
- Replace your toothbrush once a month, with each cycle of treatment or if you have a mouth infection
- Floss once a day unless you have been advised not to. If flossing is not advisable ask if you are able to use Interdental brushes or sticks
- Examine your mouth daily to pick up problems early. Tell your medical team if you spot any changes as they may be able to refer you to a dentist or dietician for help
- Rinse your mouth with water after consuming foods with a high sugar content (e.g. dietary supplements prescribed to boost your calorie intake)
- If you wear dentures ensure that you rinse them after every meal and carefully clean them at bedtime. Leave dentures out at night in order for your mouth to recover and to decrease your risk of infection

Changes in taste when having cancer treatment

People having treatment often find they develop changes in taste. Food you normally like may taste different, unpleasant or taste of nothing at all. This can be caused by changes to the taste buds, dry mouth, infections or the drugs themselves. These changes are often temporary and return to normal a few weeks after chemotherapy finishes.

If these taste changes affect your ability to eat as well as you should, please ask your medical team for advice.

Coping with taste changes

- Saliva is needed to appreciate taste, so take frequent sips of water. Speak with your medical team as they might be able to prescribe saliva substitutes
- Moisten your mouth at least once every 2 hours if you are not eating or drinking enough
- Drink plenty of fluids, at least 3 pints a day. Try green tea or milky drinks if coffee and tea taste odd
- Fluids sipped using a straw can be easier to drink because the straw bypasses some of the taste buds
- Keep your mouth as clean as possible with regular oral hygiene
- Your medical team may recommend you take zinc supplements
- Rinse your mouth with water or salt mouthwash (sodium chloride 0.9% solution) before eating. This will help to lubricate it
- Avoid smoking as this can make taste changes worse
- Eat in a place away from where the food was prepared, as other food smells can interfere with your sense of taste

- Smoking and alcohol will make a sore mouth worse
- To relieve pain try sucking small pieces of ice (unless advised otherwise by your specialist nurse)
- If your mouth is very sore you can use an anaesthetising mouthwash such as benzydamine (Diffiam®) before eating or drinking. Sometimes this can sting and you might need to mix it with some water to dilute it first
- You may need painkillers such as soluble paracetamol or morphine-based drugs if your pain is very severe. Always discuss your options with your medical team to ensure you receive the most appropriate medication for you
- Dentures may feel uncomfortable and difficult to keep in place. We advise against leaving your dentures out for long periods because your gums can change shape causing your dentures not to fit so well. If you are having problems with your dentures then seek advice from your dentist.

Mouth infections

Mouth infections can be caused by fungi, viruses or bacteria. When the mouth lining (the mucosa) is dry, thinned, ulcerated or inflamed (mucositis) it is more vulnerable to infections. Also, cancer treatments may lower your immunity to infections.

Symptoms of mucostis

- Ulcers in your mouth, possibly on the tongue and lips. These can be painful and interfere with eating, drinking or talking.
- A reduced sense of taste
- Dry mouth
- Bad smelling breath

Tips for coping with a sore mouth

- Speak to your medical team about mucosal protectors to coat ulcers e.g. Gel Clair
- Avoid irritating foods such as citrus fruits and juices, tomatoes, pickles, spicy and salty foods
- Avoid textured food like toast or raw vegetables as they can scrape the lining of the mouth
- Cook foods to a purée or cut them into small pieces
- Avoid food and drinks that are very warm or hot. Cold food and drinks can be soothing for a sore mouth
- Try to drink at least 3 pints of fluid a day to keep your mouth moist and help loosen thick saliva. Carry a water bottle with you and take sips from it regularly. You might find that using a straw makes drinking easier
- Limit drinks with caffeine (such as coffee, tea, and colas)
- Dilute fruit juices and try to avoid citrus fruit juices, such as orange or grapefruit

- Avoid cooking in metallic pans. Use plastic or wooden utensils and plastic cutlery if metal cutlery leaves a metallic taste in your mouth
- Eat the foods you like the taste of and avoid those you do not
- Food is sometimes easier to eat if it is eaten warm rather than hot, or even try eating it cold
- Try eating foods with stronger flavours or try stronger versions of the foods you already like, such as smoked ham, mature cheese. Be careful with spicy foods if your mouth is sore
- Rinsing your mouth out with water after meals can also help diminish unpleasant tastes
- Fizzy drinks tend to have a stronger flavour, but avoid anything too sugary in order to protect your teeth (and if you are diabetic)

Tips for when you have dry mouth

- Ask your dentist, pharmacist or medical team about products that are designed to provide moisture and comfort (e.g. Bioextra or Biotene gel)
- Choose products without alcohol or sodium lauryl sulphate as your mouth may be sensitive
- Pay attention to keeping your tongue clean to help prevent soreness and cracking

- Maintain good oral hygiene
- Avoid sugary food and drinks or those containing acid e.g. cola, sports drinks, citrus fruit juices, biscuits, sweets and cakes
- Cut down on things that dry the mouth, such as alcohol, caffeine (in coffee, cola and tea) and cigarettes
- Try to drink at least 3 pints of fluid a day, take frequent sips of water and carry a bottle of water with you when you go out
- Keep a glass of water beside the bed at night. If your mouth is sore then spray your mouth using an atomiser filled with water
- To stimulate saliva production, try sucking on hard-boiled, sugar-free sweets (avoid lemon-flavoured ones as these can be acidic), or try chewing sugar-free gum
- Sucking small pieces of ice can also help (unless advised otherwise by specialist nurse)
- Drinking water or sugar-free juices at mealtimes is helpful, but avoid anything with citrus juices (e.g. lemon, grapefruit)
- Milk, yogurt or buttermilk can help retain moisture
- Try rubbing olive oil, or a dry mouth treatment gel around your gums at night to retain moisture and lubrication
- Keep lips moist with lip balm or petroleum jelly

- You can increase the air humidity with an air humidifier, which can be particularly helpful at night. Alternatively try steam inhalation (breathing in the steam from a bowl of hot water)
- Ensure you rinse your dentures after every meal and carefully clean them at bedtime
- If dentures are difficult to wear; smear saliva replacement gel on the inner surface of the denture. If they are loose, try Secure® denture adhesive which works without saliva. If you are having problems seek advice from your dentist.

Sore mouth

If your mouth is very sore you may have mouth ulcers or be developing mucositis or an infection which needs treating promptly.

Oral mucositis

Cancer treatments target cells that are dividing rapidly such as the cancer cells they are killing off. However, they also affect some of the body's normal cells such as the cells lining the mouth (the mucosa). During treatment the mucosal membrane often becomes thin as it is unable to multiply and repair itself quickly enough, leaving your mouth vulnerable to ulcers and inflammation. When this is severe it is called mucositis. Milder cases often ease a few weeks after treatment ends but more severe cases may require hospital treatment.