

# Taking Care of Your Mouth During Cancer Treatment

**For patients who are getting radiation, chemotherapy or both for head and neck cancer**

In this pamphlet, you will learn:

- Who is at risk for getting mouth side effects
- How mouth problems can affect your life
- Why mouth care is important during cancer treatment
- What good mouth care involves
- What to do when side effects start
- How to keep your mouth healthy after treatment and for the rest of your life



## **Who is at risk of getting mouth side effects?**

Mouth side effects start 1 to 2 weeks after you begin treatment, and may last until a few weeks after treatment finishes. Talk to your health care team if you get any of these side effects.

Anyone who is getting radiation, chemotherapy or both for head and neck cancer is at risk of mouth side effects.

You are at higher risk if:

- The number of white blood cells in your blood is low. These cells are needed to fight infections.
- You are getting both radiation and chemotherapy treatment together.

## **What are mouth side effects?**

Mouth side effects include:

- Dry mouth and lips
- Thick mucus and saliva
- Soreness in the mouth and throat. Small ulcers (sores) may form in the lining of your mouth and throat. These sores are called mucositis. It can be painful.
- Taste changes

## **How can mouth problems affect your life?**

Mouth and throat soreness can make eating, drinking and swallowing difficult. Thick mucus can build up and make you feel sick. As a result, you may not drink enough and become dehydrated. You may also not eat enough, which can cause you to lose weight. Severe dehydration and weight loss can cause changes or delays to your cancer treatment.

## **Why is mouth care important during cancer treatment?**

Good mouth care will help keep your teeth, gums and mouth clean. This can help prevent mouth side effects and infection. Good mouth care also includes rinsing often to reduce plaque buildup, remove bits of toothpaste, food and other debris in your mouth. This helps to keep your saliva thinner, and keep your mouth moist.

## **What does good mouth care involve?**

Good mouth care includes keeping your mouth clean and healthy by brushing your teeth, flossing, and rinsing often. If you have your own teeth, daily fluoride treatment using trays and gel is important. If you have dentures, (false teeth) it is important to clean them daily or more often. You should always remove your dentures at nighttime.

## **Brushing and flossing your teeth**

- Always use a soft-bristle toothbrush. You can buy one at your local pharmacy.
- If toothbrush is new, rinse your toothbrush under hot water to soften the bristles before using.
- Use gentle toothpaste that will not irritate or cause a burning feeling in your mouth, like Sensodyne® or fruit-flavoured toothpaste for children. Avoid mint flavoured toothpaste since it may cause a burning sensation. SLS (sodium laurel sulfate) is the ingredient in toothpaste that makes it frothy. SLS can be irritating to your tongue and mouth.
- Brush your teeth after each meal and at bedtime.
- If you floss, continue to floss carefully to avoid gum bleeding.
- Use dental soft picks (picks with soft, flexible bristles) to slide between your teeth to help remove food and plaque. This is another option if you do not want to floss or if you have not been flossing regularly.

## **Using fluoride treatments**

Radiation to the head and neck can increase your risk for cavities. Daily use of neutral pH fluoride treatment (Neutragel®) will help prevent cavities.

Your Princess Margaret dentist will show you how to do a fluoride treatment. It is an important part of your good mouth care routine. You will need to do fluoride treatments every day, for the rest of your life. This fluoride treatment is different than the one that your dentist might do every 3 to 6 months.

- Use the soft trays that are custom-made for you by the Princess Margaret dentist. Always use the pH neutral fluoride gel in your trays. You can buy it from the Dental Department, the Pharmacy at the Princess Margaret, or your local pharmacy can order it for you.

## **Caring for your dentures (if you have them)**

- Always rinse your dentures before putting them into your mouth.
- Rinse your dentures with cool water before cleaning with a toothbrush. Do not use toothpaste to clean your dentures.
- Remove dentures before sleeping or if you get mouth sores.
- Do not make any changes to the form or structure of your dentures during and up to 6 months after your cancer treatment. Gums tend to shrink during treatment but this is only short-term or temporary.

Brush the inside of your mouth (gums and tongue) twice a day, morning and night.

- ✓ Always use a soft-bristle toothbrush.
- ✓ Use gentle toothpaste that will not irritate or cause a burning feeling in your mouth, like Sensodyne or fruit-flavoured toothpaste for children.

## **Rinsing your mouth**

- Use a mouth rinse to swish and gargle, if you can. You will find mouth rinse recipes below.
- Do not use store-bought mouthwash because most contain alcohol. Alcohol can dry your mouth and cause pain.
- Avoid mint flavoured rinses.
- At the beginning of treatment you can start to rinse (using the rinses listed in this pamphlet) when you wake up, before and after meals and at bedtime.
- Rinse more often if you notice your saliva getting thicker. Rinse your mouth every 1 to 2 hours, if possible, while you are awake. If you wake up during the night, you may want to rinse your mouth at that time.
- Carry mouth rinse with you at all times so that you can rinse more often. Mouth rinse does not need to be stored in the fridge.

## How to make mouth rinses?

Below are some mouth rinse recipes.

### Flat Club Soda

1. Open any brand of store-bought Club Soda.
2. Leave it open until the soda is “flat” or no longer fizzes (the bubbles are gone).

### Baking Soda and Water

1. Dissolve 1 level teaspoon of baking soda in 2 cups (500 ml) water.
2. Stir until the baking soda is dissolved.

### Salt and Water

1. Dissolve 1 level teaspoon of salt in 2 cups (500 ml) of warm water.
2. Stir until the salt is dissolved.

### Baking Soda, Salt and Water

1. Dissolve ½ level teaspoon of baking soda and ½ level teaspoon of salt in 2 cups (500 ml) of water.
2. Stir until the baking soda and salt are dissolved.

**After making your rinse, store the rinse in a container and cover.**

Always make and use new mouth rinse every 24 hours. Old mouth rinse is less helpful and may contain bacteria.

## **What to do for your mouth when side effects start**

### **For dry mouth:**

- Use a mouth rinse recipe to rinse your mouth every 1 to 2 hours.
- Your doctor or dentist may recommend artificial saliva or water base gels available at local pharmacies, to keep your lining of your mouth and throat moist
- Avoid smoking and drinking alcohol because it can dry out your mouth.
- Use a cool mist humidifier or vaporizer to help keep the air moist, especially at night when you are sleeping. Do not use a warm mist humidifier. Change the water every 24 hours.
- Add gravy and sauces to food make it softer and easier to swallow.
- Chew sugarless gum or suck on sugarless hard candy (like gum and pastilles that contain Xylitol) to help keep your mouth moist.
- Use products for oral dryness by Oral Science (such as XyliMelts, Xyligum), or BioXtra (gels, sprays).
- Rub a small amount (1/4 teaspoon) of vegetable oil to the skin inside your mouth. This can help moisten your mouth. This may be very helpful especially at night, but also at times during the day.

### **For dry lips:**

- Use non-lanolin lip balm or water-based lubricant to keep your lips moist.
- Avoid licking your lips because it can cause more dryness.

### **For thick mucus and saliva:**

- Use a mouth rinse recipe to rinse your mouth before meals and every 1 to 2 hours, if possible (see recipes in this pamphlet).
- Take sips of water and swallow your saliva regularly in between rinses.
- Keep well hydrated by drinking fluids. Rinsing helps with keeping the saliva thinner, but staying hydrated is important. Try to drink 6 to 8 cups (1½ to 2 litres) of fluid a day or as advised by your nurse or dietitian. Fluids include anything that melts at room temperature (such as juice, milk, ice cream), not just water.

### **For sore mouth and throat:**

- Use mouth rinse in the morning, at night, before and after each meal, and as often as possible during the day.
- Use Mucositis Mouth Wash (swish and swallow or swish and spit) 5 minutes before each meal and at bedtime and as prescribed by your doctor or nurse practitioner.
- Talk to your health care team about good pain control. Take your pain medication as prescribed by your doctor or nurse practitioner.
- Limit hot, spicy, rough and acidic foods.

### **For thrush infection (oral candidiasis)**

Mouth soreness can also be caused by infection. If you have a sudden increase in pain, it may be a sign that you have an infection. The most common one is a fungal infection called thrush, also known as candidiasis. Thrush usually appears as white or cream-coloured patches, or a coating that can be wiped off, over the lining of the mouth and tongue. It is treated with anti-fungal medicines.

- If you develop a thrush infection and wear dentures, contact your Princess Margaret dentist for special denture care. Your dentures need to be treated so you do not re-infect your mouth.

### **For taste changes:**

Some people will notice that taste changes or loss of taste all together. Other people will find flavours much stronger. Some people taste more salt or sweet until the taste buds begin to recover.

- Rinse your mouth and brush your tongue before each meal
- Add herbs or gravy to food and drink to improve flavours or cover bad taste
- Eat room temperature food and drinks to limit strong odours and tastes
- Try using plastic cutlery and glass cooking pots to reduce metallic taste
- Try a variety of things to find what works for you
- Suck on sugarless candy to cover bad taste

### **How to keep your mouth healthy after treatment and for the rest of your life**

Maintain a good mouth care routine that includes:

- Brush and floss your teeth, and clean your dentures 2 to 3 times a day
- Gently brush your tongue each day
- Rinse your mouth 1 to 2 times daily using one of the mouth rinse recipes
- Keep using fluoride trays daily for the rest of your life
- Tell your health care team if you have more mouth soreness or get a mouth infection

## Other helpful resources at Princess Margaret Cancer Centre

- [“Eating Tips for Sore Mouth and Throat”](#) pamphlet
- [“Managing the Side Effects of Chemotherapy”](#) pamphlet
- [“What to Expect When Getting Radiation Therapy for Head and Neck Cancer”](#) pamphlet

You can get copies of these resources at the Patient & Family Library (main floor), or visit [www.uhn.ca/PrincessMargaret](http://www.uhn.ca/PrincessMargaret) and search for the pamphlet title.

**Important:** This is not a full list of brands or products. The University Health Network does not recommend one brand over another and is not responsible for any products listed. Please contact each company directly to find out more about their products.

The development of patient education resources is supported by the Princess Margaret Cancer Foundation.



### Have feedback about this document?

Please fill out our survey. Use this link: [surveyMonkey.com/r/uhn-pe](https://surveyMonkey.com/r/uhn-pe)

Visit [www.uhnpatienteducation.ca](http://www.uhnpatienteducation.ca) for more health information. Contact [pfep@uhn.ca](mailto:pfep@uhn.ca) to request this brochure in a different format, such as large print or electronic formats.

© 2022 University Health Network. All rights reserved. Use this material for your information only. It does not replace advice from your doctor or other health care professional. Do not use this information for diagnosis or treatment. Ask your health care provider for advice about a specific medical condition. You may print 1 copy of this brochure for non-commercial and personal use only.