

Dental and Oral Health

Why are dental and oral health important?

Dental and oral health refers to the well-being of the entire mouth, including the teeth, gums, lining of the mouth, and salivary glands. More than one-third of Americans diagnosed with cancer each year develop dental and oral side effects from cancer treatment. These side effects, which include dry mouth, mouth sores, tooth decay, infection, inflammation, and pain, may make it difficult to eat, talk, chew, or swallow. Many of these side effects can be prevented or managed by maintaining good dental and oral health.



What causes dental and oral side effects?

Mouth sores are a common side effect of some types of chemotherapy. Other potential side effects include pain in the mouth and gums, peeling or burning of the tongue, infection, and changes in taste. Radiation therapy to the head and neck may cause dry mouth, tooth decay, loss of taste, mouth and gum sores, bone disease, and stiffness in the jaw. A side effect of stem cell/bone marrow transplantation, called graft-versus-host disease, may cause dry mouth, mouth sores, cavities, sensitivity to spicy or acidic foods, and difficulty swallowing due to a decrease in saliva. Medications that help manage cancer symptoms and side effects may also cause dental and oral side effects. To learn about your risk of experiencing specific side effects and how long these side effects may last, talk with your health care team.

How can I prevent dental and oral side effects?

Gently brush your teeth 2 times a day and floss regularly. Schedule a dental examination and cleaning at least 4 weeks before starting cancer treatment. The dentist will look for any problems that need to be addressed before starting treatment. If you need to have a dental procedure, such as removing a tooth, ask the dentist how soon after the procedure you can start cancer treatment. Many oral oncologists recommend allowing at least 2 weeks for healing between dental surgery and the start of cancer treatment. If you did not see a dentist before starting cancer treatment, see one as soon as possible.

How are dental and oral side effects treated?

The specific treatment your doctor or dentist recommends will depend on your symptoms. Mouth rinses that contain salt and baking soda may help treat mouth sores, and pain medications may be used to manage pain. In addition, your doctor may prescribe antibiotics, antiviral drugs, or antifungal drugs to treat infections. Drinking water and sugarless drinks or sucking on ice chips may help manage dry mouth. Avoid substances that dry out the mouth, such as soda, fruit juice, alcohol, and tobacco products. Medications that stimulate the production of saliva may be recommended for some people to help prevent or reduce dry mouth. For dry mouth caused by radiation therapy to the head and neck, your doctor may prescribe topical oral gels or other medications.

Questions to ask the health care team

Regular communication is important for making informed decisions about your health care. Consider asking your health care team the following questions:

- What are the potential dental and oral side effects of my treatment plan?
- Will the side effects be short term or long term?
- What can I do to help prevent dental and oral side effects?
- Should I see a dentist before starting treatment?
- Can you recommend an oral oncologist or oncologic dentist?
- How soon after having a dental procedure can I begin cancer treatment?
- How can I manage any dental and oral side effects that may occur?
- Would you recommend medication or other strategies to manage side effects?
- Are there any foods or drinks that could make dental or oral side effects worse that I should avoid?
- What should I do if these side effects are affecting my ability to eat?
- Whom should I call with questions or problems?
- Is there anything else I should be asking?

Find more questions to ask the health care team at www.cancer.net/sideeffects. For a digital list of questions, download Cancer.Net's free mobile app at www.cancer.net/app.

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WORDS TO KNOW

Caries:

Tooth decay

Chemotherapy:

The use of drugs to destroy cancer cells

Dysphagia:

Difficulty swallowing

Mucosa:

Lining of the mouth

Mucositis:

Mouth sores

Oral oncologist/oncologic dentist:

A dentist who specializes in the dental and oral health of people with cancer

Oral surgeon:

A dentist who specializes in surgery of the mouth and jaw

Osteonecrosis of the jaw:

Jaw disease that can cause pain, swelling, and infection, loose teeth, and exposed bone

Periodontist:

A dentist who specializes in diagnosing and treating gum disease

Prosthodontist:

A dentist who specializes in replacing teeth or other structures in the mouth

Radiation therapy:

The use of high-energy x-rays to destroy cancer cells

Salivary glands:

The glands that produce saliva

Symptom management:

The relief of side effects, also called palliative or supportive care

Xerostomia:

Dry mouth

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