Managing a Dry Mouth During Cancer Treatment

A dry mouth (xerostomia) is common with head and neck radiation and some medicines, and it can make chewing, tasting, swallowing, and speaking harder. Sipping fluids, moistening foods, sucking on ice chips or sugar-free candy, and good mouth care can help. Dryness raises tooth-decay risk, so dental care matters.

Why the mouth gets dry

Saliva keeps the mouth comfortable and helps with tasting, chewing, and swallowing. Radiation to the head and neck can affect the salivary glands. Some medicines reduce saliva too. Either can leave the mouth dry, a symptom called xerostomia. A dry mouth can make food harder to eat and enjoy. It can change how things taste, and make speaking less comfortable.

Keeping your mouth comfortable

Sipping water or other fluids through the day is one of the simplest things that helps. Keep a drink within reach. Sucking on ice chips, sugar-free hard candy, or sugar-free gum can stimulate saliva. A humidifier moistens the air. Keeping lips moisturized and rinsing the mouth also ease dryness. Over-the-counter saliva substitutes and mouth-moistening products help some people. NCI says saliva substitutes can coat, protect and moisten your mouth and throat. Lip balm helps dry lips. NCI also notes that acupuncture may help with dry mouth. Ask your team what they recommend and what is available to you.

Eating with a dry mouth

Soft, moist foods go down more easily than dry ones. Add gravies, sauces, broths, milk, or melted butter. Dipping or blending foods makes meals easier too. Cool or room-temperature foods may feel better than hot ones. It helps to limit very dry, crumbly, salty, spicy, or acidic foods. Alcohol and caffeine add to dryness as well. NCI also lists crunchy and sugary foods, and alcohol, among things to avoid when your mouth is sore. Taking small bites and sipping between them helps swallowing. If pain is part of the picture, NCI suggests asking your team about lozenges or sprays that numb the mouth.

Daily checks that catch problems early

NCI lists these habits:

- Check your mouth every day for sores or white spots.

- Rinse your mouth through the day with warm water, baking soda and salt.
- Use a very soft toothbrush or cotton swabs.

A dry mouth is also a mouth where infections can start quietly. Tell your team about white spots as soon as you notice them, rather than watching them.

Protecting your teeth

Saliva also protects your teeth. NCI advises drinking plenty of liquids because a dry mouth can increase the risk of tooth decay and mouth infections. So the fluids you sip protect your teeth as well as your comfort.

Gentle, regular brushing with fluoride toothpaste helps. So does keeping up with dental care, during and after treatment. NCI says to visit your dentist for a cleaning and check-up before you start treatment.

How long a dry mouth lasts

NCI's patient page does not say how long a dry mouth will last or whether saliva will fully return. Ask your radiation oncologist and dentist what to expect.

Tell your care team about a dry mouth. There are treatments and products that can help. Everyone's situation is different. This is general information, not advice for you personally. Your care team can tailor it to your treatment, and so can an oncology dietitian if one is available.

When to get help sooner

A dry mouth is usually a comfort problem. Sometimes it points to an infection, or to not drinking enough.

- **Call 911 or go to an emergency department if** you cannot swallow at all, or you have trouble breathing. Do not drive yourself.
- **Call your care team now, at any hour, if** your temperature reaches 100.4°F (38°C) or higher during treatment. NCI lists a fever as a reason to call your doctor or nurse. CDC says a fever during chemotherapy is a medical emergency, and it may be the only sign of an infection. If you cannot reach them, go to the emergency room and tell the staff you are having cancer treatment.
- **Call your care team right away if** pain or dryness in your mouth, lips, or throat makes it hard to eat, drink, or sleep. NCI says it is important to call your doctor or nurse about this.
- **Call your care team right away if** you have passed no urine for 8 hours or more, or you have not kept any fluids down for 12 hours. MedlinePlus (medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003117.htm) says to contact your provider right away for these.
- **Call your care team right away if** your gums bleed and the bleeding does not stop after a few minutes. NCI (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/bleeding-bruising) lists bleeding from the

mouth that does not stop as a reason to call.

- **Call your care team the same day if** you see white patches, white spots, thick coating, or new sores in your mouth. These can mean a mouth infection such as thrush. During chemotherapy, call right away, day or night: NCI (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/infection) says infections during treatment can be life threatening.
- **Call your care team the same day if** you feel dizzy when you stand, or you are passing less urine than usual or dark yellow urine.
- **Call your care team within a day or two if** a tooth becomes loose, or the dryness is slowly getting worse even though you can still eat, drink and sleep.

Do not wait for your next scheduled visit for any of these.

Sources

- National Cancer Institute — Mouth and Throat Problems During Cancer Treatment (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/mouth-throat)
- CDC — Fever and Cancer Treatment (cdc.gov/cancer-preventing-infections/patients/fever.html)
- National Cancer Institute — Nutrition in Cancer Care (PDQ) Patient Version (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/appetite-loss/nutrition-pdq)
- National Cancer Institute — Eating Hints: Before, During, and After Cancer Treatment (cancer.gov/publications/patient-education/eating-hints)
- MedlinePlus — Dry mouth during cancer treatment (medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000032.htm)
- MedlinePlus — Nausea and vomiting, adults (medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003117.htm)
- National Cancer Institute — Infection and Neutropenia during Cancer Treatment (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/infection)
- National Cancer Institute — Bleeding and Bruising (Thrombocytopenia) and Cancer Treatment (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/bleeding-bruising)

Source: National Cancer Institute — Mouth and Throat Problems During Cancer Treatment (cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/mouth-throat)

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