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Patient Information Leaflet

Caring for your mouth during chemotherapy and radiotherapy



Please speak to a member of staff if you need this leaflet in large print, braille, audio or another language

Introduction

This leaflet provides you with information on ways in which chemotherapy or radiotherapy to the head and neck can affect your mouth.

You will have been referred to the Consultant Restorative Dentist prior to treatment who works as part of the Head and Neck Cancer Team.

How should I prepare for treatment?

A thorough dental examination will be carried out before your treatment starts.

You may be referred to other members of the team including a dental therapist.

Your oral health needs to be as good as it can be before starting treatment to avoid problems later on.

What happens when the treatment begins?

- About 2 weeks after the start of treatment, you may notice an increase in mouth ulcers and mouth soreness.
- Your mouth may feel uncomfortable towards the end of treatment and for up to 6 weeks after the completion of your treatment.
- Your mouth may become dry and your taste can be affected. This will make it difficult to swallow, eat and clean your teeth.

Write below any questions you have or notes from your consultation.

Side effects of the treatment

Radiotherapy sides effects

- Radiotherapy frequency damages the glands which produce saliva and can make your mouth dry.
- Mucositis is a common side effect affecting the lining of your mouth which can cause mouth ulcers and pain or difficulty in swallowing.

Chemotherapy side effects

- Chemotherapy can cause Mucositis which can also make the lining of the mouth very sore.
- Chemotherapy can reduce the white cell count which may make you prone to dental infections.

What can I do

- Take regular sips of water to keep your mouth moist.
- Try dry mouth gels, sprays, discs (Xylimelts) and lozenges Please ask for advice.
- Brush your teeth and tongue 3 times daily with a soft small headed toothbrush, manual or electric. If the toothbrush bristles are too rigid, soften them in warm water or use a soft toothbrush.
- Use the interdental brushes/floss regularly as advised by your hygienist to clean the spaces in between your teeth.
- Brush with Duraphat 5000ppm toothpaste (prescription only) and spit out after brushing.
Do not rinse.
- Use Difflam Oral rinse 4 times daily during your treatment as this may help with any soreness.
- To reduce bacteria levels, use alcohol free Corsodyl (chlorhexidine) mouthwash 2 times daily. Dilute if needed.
- Chew sugar-free chewing gum to encourage saliva flow as this moistens and lubricates the mouth. It protects against tooth decay, erosion and sensitivity and aids swallowing and speech.

- Have dietary foods such as milk or cheese at the end of meals to help neutralise any acid in your mouth.
- A teaspoon of sodium bicarbonate in a cup of warm water can be used as a mouthwash and help with a coated tongue.
- Soft, chilled foods and adding gravy/sauces to food can help with swallowing.

Prevention of Dental Decay

If you find it difficult to reduce your sugar intake, remember the frequency of sugar is more detrimental than the actual amount consumed.

Sugary foods or sugary drinks consumed over a short period of time are less harmful than if they are eaten over a period of hours.

Hints and Tips

- Nutritional drinks are needed as part of your recovery. You should however try to consume these drinks within 5 to 10 minutes and rinse with plain water afterwards. This minimizes the risk of dental decay.
- Do not scrub your teeth. Brush gently
- Optimize your oral hygiene by including tooth brushing techniques and interdental cleaning.

It is understandable to want to have sugar and flavour during your treatment

We recommend however you should avoid the following as they can be harmful to your teeth.

- Carbonated / Fizzy drinks
- **Food or drinks containing sugar in between meals and especially 1 hour before bed.**
Check with your doctor for alternative sugar free medicines.
- Avoid eating sugary mints, boiled sweets etc. as these can dramatically increase the rate at which your teeth decay.
- Tobacco products including 'vaping'.
- Alcohol and products containing alcohol.
- Spicy/acidic foods.
- 'Hidden sugars' in processed foods. Check before you buy.
- Drinks with caffeine. Switch to decaffeinated, as this can help with a dry mouth.
- Excessive periods of sugar intake per day.
Stick to meal times only.
- Sugar in tea and coffee. Swap the sugar for sweetener.
- Medications containing sugar. If in doubt check with your dietician what these are.