

Mouth and Throat Changes

What they are and why they happen

Some cancer treatments can harm cells that line your mouth, throat and lips. This can cause problems with your teeth, gums, lining of your mouth and glands that make saliva. Mouth and throat problems can include:

- A dry mouth with little or no saliva.
- Infections of your gums, teeth or tongue.
- Greater sensitivity to hot or cold foods.
- Mouth sores that can cause trouble eating.
- Changes in your taste and smell. Foods can have strange tastes, like metal or chalk, have no taste at all or taste and smell different.

What you can do

Ask your doctor if you need to see a dentist before starting treatment.

If so, be sure to tell your dentist that you will be getting treatment for cancer.

Check your mouth and tongue each day. Call your doctor or nurse right away if you see any problems such as mouth sores or white spots.

Keep your mouth moist. You can sip water throughout the day, suck on ice chips or sugar-free hard candy and chew sugar-free gum.

Use a water-based moisturizer on your lips at least 2 times a day.

This helps keep your mouth moist. Avoid lip balms or moisturizers that contain petroleum. Petroleum attracts and holds germs, which can lead to infection.

Clean your mouth, teeth, gums and tongue at least 2 times a day.

- Brush your teeth, gums, and tongue after each meal and at bedtime with an extra soft toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste.
- Ask your doctor or nurse if and how often you should floss your teeth.



Rinse your mouth at least 3 times a day. Do not use mouthwash that contains alcohol because it can cause burning and dryness. You can make a mouth rinse by mixing ¼ teaspoon baking soda and ¼ teaspoon salt in 1 cup (8 ounces) of warm water. Swish the mixture around in your mouth, gargle and spit it out. Store any unused mouth rinse in a covered container at room temperature. If your mouth rinse is more than 24 hours old, throw it away and make a new batch.

Be careful of what you eat when your mouth is sore.

- Choose foods that are moist, soft and easy to swallow. Soften food with gravy, sauces, broth, yogurt or other liquids. Avoid foods that stick to your teeth.
- Take small bites of food, chew slowly and sip liquids while you eat. Eat foods at cool or room temperature. Warm or hot foods can hurt your mouth or throat. Suck on ice chips or popsicles to relieve mouth pain.
- Ask to speak with a dietician for ideas of foods that are easy to eat.

Stay away from things that can hurt, scrape or burn your mouth such as:

- Sharp or crunchy foods such as crackers and potato or corn chips.
- Spicy foods, such as hot sauce, curry dishes, salsa and chili.
- Citrus fruits or juices such as orange, lemon, and grapefruit.
- Food and drinks with a lot of sugar, such as candy or soda.
- Beer, wine and other alcohol.
- Toothpicks or other sharp objects.
- Tobacco products such as cigarettes, pipes, cigars and chewing tobacco

If you wear dentures, retainers or other oral devices

- Brush dentures 2 times a day and rinse well. Use a soft bristle toothbrush or a brush made for cleaning dentures. Clean other oral devices 2 times a day as recommended for that device.
- Keep dentures moist when not being worn. Soak them in the denture cleaning solution recommended by your dentist.

- Clean denture and oral device soaking cups and change soaking solution daily.
- Remove dentures or other oral devices when cleaning your mouth. If you have mouth sores, or your mouth is inflamed or painful, avoid wearing these items to prevent further irritation.

Call your cancer doctor's office right away if you have:

- Bad pain in your mouth or throat. Your doctor may order medicine to help lessen this.
- Open sores on your lips, gums, or tongue
- White, cheese-like patches in your mouth or throat. This could be a sign of infection.
- Bleeding gums that do not stop bleeding easily
- Fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher or chills
- Mouth problems that cause you to not be able to eat



This info is a general resource. It is not meant to replace your doctor's advice. Ask your doctor or health care team any questions. Always follow their instructions.