

Chemotherapy Tips for Oral Care

Cancer awareness; it's important to understand the side effects of cancer on dental health, including the teeth, gums, salivary glands and other oral tissues.

When there are pre-existing dental issues such as cavities, abscesses, or gingivitis, the infection may become worse during cancer treatment. Gums are more likely to become swollen and painful, with a higher probability of bleeding. Mouth sores may occur during chemotherapy, while other mouth irritations often worsen. To help prevent serious problems, ideally **see a dentist 1 month prior to starting chemotherapy**. Side effects can be painful, but here are tips to minimize or prevent sores, and ensure oral comfort during cancer treatment:

- **Medication:** There are specific medications that can ease discomfort and prevent sores -- these can be prescribed by a doctor. Pain medicine, such as Tylenol or stronger, may also be used. Always avoid using aspirin or non-steroidal medication (Advil, Motrin) during chemotherapy, as they can cause bleeding. For dry mouth, saliva substitutes can help moisten mouth tissue.
- **Work with your dental professionals even before chemotherapy begins:** Your dental professional and oncologist can work together to make you as comfortable as possible. See your dentist before chemotherapy begins and continue with regularly scheduled dental appointments to monitor your oral condition and make any changes as needed.
- **Oral health routine:** Unless otherwise recommended, continue to gently brush your teeth twice per day with fluoride toothpaste, and gently floss every day.
- **Stay hydrated:** Drink at least eight glasses of water daily, this is helpful with many side effects including dry mouth, or xerostomia. Use lip balm to help prevent your lips from cracking, and use a cool mist humidifier to add much-needed moisture to your home.
- **Food and drink:** There are certain foods that you may want to avoid, such as spicy dishes and anything that is difficult to chew. Tomato and citrus juices will irritate any mouth sores you may have. Avoiding caffeinated and alcoholic beverages is a smart idea, as they both promote mouth dryness. Suck on ice chips, chew sugarless gum or use sugar-free hard candies to provide moisture and avoid a dry mouth.

To help neutralize stomach acids left in the mouth after vomiting, use a baking soda mouthwash by mixing ¼ tsp baking soda and 1 cup water. Swish this for about 30 seconds and then spit it out. Discard any unused mouthwash after 24 hours. If you are using this for a young child who cannot swish and spit, apply it to their teeth, tongue and gums with gauze or their toothbrush.

For children and youth experiencing mouth sores, offer foods like: milkshakes, scrambled eggs, pureed foods, ice chips, custards/puddings, ice cream or frozen yogurt. Tooth and mouth care for children undergoing chemotherapy and/or radiation is just as important, and should follow the same strict guidelines as for adults.