

Managing Mouth Sores



Mouth sores are a common side effect of certain chemotherapy drugs as well as radiation to the head or neck area.

Chemotherapy and radiation therapy kill rapidly dividing cells, such as cancer cells. However, the gastrointestinal (GI) tract, including the mouth and the throat, is made up of cells that divide rapidly.

For this reason, the GI tract is particularly susceptible to damage from chemotherapy and radiation treatment. Chemotherapy or radiation-induced damage to the cells lining the mouth, throat, and gastrointestinal tract is called mucositis. This side effect of cancer treatment can significantly affect how you feel and may cause delays in treatment.

Diagnosing mouth sores

Symptoms of mouth sores commonly occur 3 to 10 days following treatment with chemotherapy. You may experience a burning sensation followed by ulcers, and your mouth may appear red (inflammation) with sores (ulcerations). You may also experience discomfort and pain.

- Mouth sores can make chewing and swallowing difficult, interfering with your food intake, resulting in weight loss.
- You may have difficulty talking.
- Because the lining of your mouth also serves to protect you against infection, mouth sores make you more susceptible to bacterial, fungal, or viral infections in the mouth.
- Ultimately, mouth sores can become severe enough that it is necessary to reduce your chemotherapy dose or delay your treatment in order to allow your mouth to heal.

Treatment that makes mouth sores worse

Mouth sores can occur with any treatment, it is more severe if you receive the following:

- Radiation for head and neck cancer
- Combined chemotherapy and radiation therapy

Other factors that make mouth sores worse

A number of other factors contribute to the severity of mouth sores, including:

- Poor oral and dental health prior to treatment
- Kidney disease
- Age – younger children or older adults
- Smoking and the use of chewing tobacco
- Harsh foods and alcohol

Preventing and treating mouth sores

Treatment for mouth sores generally consists of good oral care, mouthwashes that do not contain alcohol, and cryotherapy (sucking on ice chips).

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Oral care

Good oral care helps prevent mouth sores, including:

- Rinse your mouth with a baking soda and saltwater solution 2 or 3 times per day.
- Brush your teeth 2 or 3 times per day with a soft toothbrush.

Mouthwashes

A mouthwash of salt and baking soda may relieve mouth sores as well as medicated mouthwashes and is less expensive.

- Dissolve 1 teaspoon of baking soda and 1 teaspoon of salt in 4-6 ounces of water. Gargle and rinse for 30 seconds then spit out. Use 3-4 times per day.

Cold Therapy or Cryotherapy (ice chips)

You can sometimes relieve mouth pain by sucking ice chips when the chemotherapy drug is most concentrated in the body. This technique, called cryotherapy, works by decreasing blood flow to the cells in the mouth, reducing exposure to the drug and decreasing the risk of developing mouth sores. If this is an option for you during your treatment, your nurse will instruct you on how to do it to be most effective.