Dental or Teeth Concerns?

Problems with the teeth or mouth are common in people being treated for cancer. Preventive dental care before cancer treatment begins is very important. Preventing and controlling oral complications during treatment can help you to continue treatment and enjoy a better quality of life.

To manage oral complications, your care team will work closely with your dentist and may refer you to other health professionals with special training.

Treating new problems as soon as they appear may make oral complications less severe. Sometimes treatment doses need to be decreased or treatment stopped because of oral complications. When there are fewer complications, cancer treatment may work better, you may have a better quality of life.

The goals of oral and dental care are different before, during, and after cancer treatment:

- Before cancer treatment, the goal is to prepare for cancer treatment by treating existing oral problems. American Dental Association, Before
- During cancer treatment, the goals are to prevent oral complications and manage problems that occur. American Dental Association, During
- After cancer treatment, the goals are to keep teeth and gums healthy and manage any long-term side effects of cancer and its treatment. American Dental Association, After

General Information About Oral Complications

- Are common in cancer patients, especially with head and neck cancer
- Can make recovery harder
- May be side effects of the disease, treatment, or other causes

High risk of oral complications because:

- Chemotherapy and radiation therapy slow or stop the growth of new cells. Normal cells in the lining of the mouth also grow quickly, so anticancer treatment can stop them from growing, too. This slows down the ability of oral tissue to repair itself by making new cells.
- Radiation therapy may damage oral tissue, salivary glands, and bone.
- Chemo / radiation both upset the healthy balance of mouth bacteria.
- Chemotherapy and radiation therapy may cause changes in the lining of the mouth and the salivary glands, which make saliva. This can upset the healthy balance of bacteria.
- These changes may lead to mouth sores, infections, and tooth decay.
- People with dentures may develop problems with them becoming ill-fitting if they lose weight or painful if they have mouth sores. If there is change, discuss the fit and use of dentures with a dentist.

Helpful Hints

- See a dentist 1 month before cancer treatment begins to make sure your mouth is healthy.
- Give your dentist your cancer doctor’s contact information. It’s important they talk about your cancer treatment.
- Take good care of your mouth during and after treatment. Follow instructions how to keep your mouth clean.
- Ask your doctor if flossing should be a part of your oral care during treatment especially during chemotherapy.
- Keep your mouth moist by drinking lots of water, sucking ice chips, and using sugar free gum or candy. Artificial saliva, available over the counter, may also be necessary.
- Avoid foods and drinks that could irritate your mouth such as sharp, crunchy foods or hot, spicy foods.
- Avoid tobacco products and alcoholic beverages.
- Call your healthcare provider if your mouth hurts.
- Talk to your dentist about fluoride gel to help prevent tooth decay.
- Exercise the jaw muscles three times a day: open and close the mouth as far as possible (without causing pain) 20 times. This helps prevent jaw stiffness.
- If you receive radiation to the head and neck area, make sure to discuss additional mouth care instructions with your treatment team.

Resources for Additional Information:

- Cancer.Net, Dental and Oral Health
- NIH, NCI Oral Complications of Chemotherapy and Head/Neck Radiation(PDQ®)
- U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services, Head and Neck Radiation Treatment & Mouth

Recursos en Español:

- Cancer.Net, Salud dental y bucal
- NIH, Instituto Nacional Del Cáncer, Complicaciones orales de la quimioterapia y la radioterapia a la cabeza y el cuello (PDQ®)
- CancerCare.org, Dentista y otros especialistas