

Radiation Treatment: Side Effects to the Mouth and Swallowing

You are getting radiation as part of your treatment for head or neck cancer. This factsheet lists ways it may affect your mouth and ability to swallow as well as tips to manage the side effects.

It is important to meet with a Speech-Language Pathologist, or speech therapist, who specializes in head and neck cancers before and during the course of your radiation treatments. Your speech therapist can help you reduce side effects and improve function.

Dry Mouth

Radiation treatment can cause the glands in your mouth to produce less saliva. This can make swallowing difficult, called dysphagia. It may also make your mouth sensitive, cause bad breath, or lead to tooth decay.

- Use a saliva substitute to keep your mouth moist. Find over-the-counter products such as Salivart, Oasis, Biotene, Spry, Xylimelt, and Stopper 4 at a pharmacy or online.
- Add 2-3 drops of glycerin to 8 ounces of water.
- Gargle with a baking soda and water mixture after meals and before bed.
 - Mix 8 oz. water, 1/4 teaspoon baking soda, and 1/4 teaspoon salt.
 - Swish for 30 seconds.
 - Spit and rise with plain water.

For patients with dentures

Make a homemade mouth moisturizer:

- Mix 3/4 cup water, 1/2 teaspoon salt, 1/2 teaspoon baking soda, and 1/2 teaspoon white karo syrup.
- Sip or spray the solution in your mouth as needed.
- Keep refrigerated.
- Gargle with flat or diet ginger ale, sparkling water, club soda, papaya juice, or pineapple juice.
Note: Carbonated and acidic drinks may increase mouth pain or soreness.
- Use a steam inhaler for 5 to 7 minutes up to five times a day.
- Run a cool mist humidifier in your home and near your bed at night.

- Take pills one at a time in a spoonful of pureed food such as applesauce, pudding, or yogurt.
- Use a swallowing spray such as Pill Glide to coat your throat and keep pills from sticking.
- Talk to your doctor about taking an over-the-counter expectorant medicine such as Mucinex if you have a lot of mouth secretions that are also very thick.

Dental Hygiene

- Brush your teeth a few times a day with a high-fluoride toothpaste such as Prevident, available with a prescription.
- Use waxed floss. It is less likely to hurt your gums.
- Use an antiseptic antibacterial mouth rinse such as Chlorhexidine, available with a prescription.
- Avoid mouthwash that contains alcohol, which can irritate or burn your mouth.
- See a dentist every 3 months instead of every 6 months.
- Talk to your dentist about extra fluoride treatments.

Pain When Swallowing

Over time, radiation treatments can irritate the tissues in your throat. This may cause pain when you swallow or cough. Here are suggestions to help:

- Gargle and swallow undiluted aloe vera concentrate. This is available at most natural food stores.
- Use a medicated mouth wash or Tetracaine Pop with lidocaine, available with a prescription, to numb the mouth and throat for a short time and relieve pain.
- Eat meals in the form of smoothies and milkshakes you can drink through a straw.
- Put natural bentonite clay such as Redmond's Clay on mouth sores.
- Use Healios, an oral health and dietary supplement over the course of your radiation. This helps heal damaged tissue and is available for purchase online.

Fibrosis

Radiation may cause fibrosis, or hardening of tissues, in your head and neck. This can affect your movement, ability to swallow, and voice.

- Meet with your speech therapist regularly. This is typically week 1, 3, 5, and 7 of radiation.
- Do the exercises from your speech therapist at least 4 times per day.
- Eat foods by mouth even if you have a feeding tube.

For More Information

Find more information on the *Dysphagia Eating Tips* factsheet at: www.huntsmancancer.org/factsheets and click on *Rehab Therapies*.

Questions? Call your speech therapist:
