

Taking Care of Your Mouth During Cancer Treatment

How Does Cancer Treatment Affect My Mouth?

Cancer treatments work by attacking cancer cells that grow fast. But sometimes these treatments also damage healthy cells in your mouth, causing mouth problems. Your mouth health can be affected at any time during your cancer treatment.

Who Is at Highest Risk?

Patients at highest risk include those with head and neck cancer. Patients with cancer in organs or blood cancers who are getting radiation therapy, chemotherapy, immunotherapy, or a stem cell transplant (bone marrow transplant) are also at risk.

Common Mouth Problems and What to Do

Dry Mouth

Dry mouth is caused by radiation therapy to the head or neck, some cancer drugs that reduce saliva production, and bone marrow transplant. You may experience dry mouth, trouble using dentures (if you have them), or trouble swallowing/speaking. To help with these problems, sip or drink water a lot during the day. You can also chew sugar-free gum or use special products that help keep your mouth moist. Your doctors might give you medicine to increase saliva and to protect your teeth. Brushing and taking care of your teeth every day can stop problems that happen when your mouth is too dry.

Mouth Sores (Oral Mucositis)

Mouth sores are caused by damage to mouth tissues from chemotherapy and radiation. Oral mucositis is an inflamed mucous membrane in the mouth. You may experience painful sores, trouble eating or drinking, and trouble speaking. To prevent mouth sores, keep your mouth clean and brush teeth gently. Follow dental recommendations. During cancer treatment, brush gently with a soft toothbrush and use salt or baking soda rinses. Use ice chips while getting

certain chemotherapy drugs. Your care team may prescribe mouth rinse medicine and pain relievers.

Cavities (Tooth Decay)

Dry mouth may lead to cavities that can get worse quickly. You may experience teeth that are sensitive to hot, cold, or sweet foods. You may notice white or brown spots on your teeth or cavities in multiple teeth. To help treat these issues, use special fluoride toothpaste every day. Your dentist may give you custom trays for fluoride or special treatments.

Mouth Infections

Infections can be caused by yeast (thrush), viruses (herpes), or bacteria. You may experience white patches, ulcers, redness, burning, or taste changes. Your doctor or dentist will prescribe antifungal, antiviral, or antibiotic medications.

When to Call Your Care Team

Call your care team immediately if your mouth hurts a lot or has sores that will not go away, your mouth feels dry or your spit changes, it is hard to eat or swallow, you see signs of infection, or anything in your mouth worries you.

Key Points

Mouth problems are common in cancer care, but they may be prevented or managed. Getting a dental checkup before starting treatment is very important. Some effects of cancer treatment may last forever, requiring increased mouth/dental care for life. Your care team can help manage all side effects. Stopping smoking can help reduce the risk of mouth problems for all patients with cancer, and it is especially important if you have head or neck cancer.

Authors: Delphine Maret, DDS, PhD; Joel B. Epstein, DMD, MSD; Emmanuelle Vigarios, MD, DDS, PhD

Published Online: March 5, 2026. doi:10.1001/jamaoncol.2025.6321

Author Affiliations: Department of Dental Surgery, Université de Toulouse, Centre Hospitalier Universitaire, Toulouse, Institut Universitaire du cancer Toulouse-Oncopole, Laboratoire CAGT, Toulouse, France (Maret); City of Hope Comprehensive Cancer Center, Duarte, California (Epstein); Cedars-Sinai Health System, Los Angeles, California (Epstein); Supportive Care Department, University of Toulouse, Oncopole Claudius Regaud, IUCT-Oncopole, Toulouse, France (Vigarios).

Conflict of Interest Disclosures: None reported.

The JAMA Oncology Patient Page is a public service of *JAMA Oncology*. The information and recommendations appearing on this page are appropriate in most instances, but they are not a substitute for medical diagnosis. For specific information concerning your personal medical condition, *JAMA Oncology* suggests that you consult your physician. This page may be downloaded or photocopied noncommercially by physicians and other health care professionals to share with patients. To purchase bulk reprints, email reprints@jamanetwork.com.

Taking care of your mouth during cancer treatment

Cancer treatment works by attacking fast-growing cancer cells but can also damage healthy cells in your mouth, potentially causing multiple problems.

*Patients with head and neck cancer or those receiving radiation therapy, chemotherapy, immunotherapy, or stem cell transplant are most at risk for **cancer-related mouth problems**.*

Mouth sores (oral mucositis): Painful sores and inflammation can make eating and drinking difficult.

Dry mouth: Reduced saliva production causes excessive dryness, making swallowing and talking difficult.

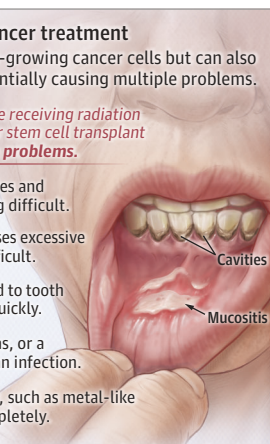
Cavities (tooth decay): Dry mouth can lead to tooth sensitivity and cavities that can get worse quickly.

Mouth infections: White patches, red areas, or a burning feeling in the mouth can indicate an infection.

Taste changes: Food may taste differently, such as metal-like or bitter, or sense of taste may be lost completely.

Facial and mouth pain may be due to cancer treatment or related to tooth pain.

Jaw and bone complications may also develop, requiring referral to a specialist.



Steps for taking care of your mouth during cancer treatment

Before treatment: See your dentist and complete all necessary dental work. If you smoke, talk to your health care team about stopping.

During treatment: Use a soft bristle toothbrush. Rinse with a solution of salt, baking soda, and water. Avoid mouthwashes that contain alcohol. Tell your health care team about any mouth problems.

After treatment: Continue mouth care practices and see your dentist for frequent checkups. Continue use of fluoride if your mouth stays dry.

