

Mucositis or Mouth Sores

Mouth sores (mucositis) can be caused by chemotherapy and radiation therapy. These cancer treatments target rapidly dividing cancer cells. The treatments can affect other rapidly dividing cells, such as those in your mucous membranes that line your mouth, throat, esophagus, stomach, intestines, and anus. You may notice discomfort anywhere along your GI tract.

Mild mucositis can feel like a sunburn or heartburn, and cause abdominal pain or rectal pain when having a bowel movement. People with severe mucositis have open sores in their mouths and along their GI tract, making it difficult to eat, talk, chew and swallow. The sores can lead to dehydration and weight loss. Bacteria can invade open sores, causing infection. Painful bowel movements can lead to constipation and reduced appetite.

A treatment to prevent mucositis is not currently available. The goal of care is to decrease the severity of symptoms and the length of time they last, and to prevent infection until the mucous membrane has healed.

If you become too tired or have persistent difficulty with mouth sores, your cancer treatment may be delayed or the dose of medication may be reduced. Mucositis tends to improve in 2-4 weeks with good mouth care.

What to do if you have mouth sores:

- Keep teeth and mouth clean.
- Rinse mouth with water every 2 hours while awake.
- Rinse mouth/gargle 3-4 times daily with ½ teaspoon salt and ½ teaspoon baking soda mixed in warm water. Begin the night before chemotherapy treatment.
- Brush teeth with a soft toothbrush and gentle toothpaste. Rinse toothbrush in hot water to keep it clean. Replace it often.
- Remove and clean dentures on a regular schedule. If there are sores under the dentures, leave the dentures out after meals and at night to help healing.
- Drink:
 - Eight 8-ounce glasses of water daily. Purified or deionized water can reduce irritation.
 - Sports drinks (e.g., Gatorade) with electrolytes to stay hydrated.
 - Protein drinks (e.g., Ensure, Boost) to help support your nutrition.
 - Fruit smoothies made with yogurt and fresh fruit.
- Use a straw to drink liquids that can irritate the sores.
- Eat soft foods for comfort: ice cream, popsicles, milkshakes, pudding, yogurt, peanut or other nut butters, Jell-O, mashed potatoes, bananas, applesauce, scrambled eggs, and oatmeal.
- Eat foods high in protein to help promote healing.
- Ask your health care team about using a saliva substitute.
- Use lip balm (moisturizing, no menthol) for dry lips.
- Floss gently to avoid irritating gums.
- Consider using a Water-Pik®.
- Suck on hard candies.
- Contact your provider if your mucositis does not respond to these self-care tips. You may be prescribed Magic Mouthwash or another medication to help relieve discomfort.

What not to do:

- Avoid:
 - Very hot and very cold foods and beverages.
 - Food and drink that can irritate tissues: citrus fruits and juices, tomatoes, and spicy or salty foods.
 - All forms of alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine, because these irritate and dry tissues.
 - Foods high in sugar, which can make it easier for bacteria to grow.
 - Breathing through your mouth.
 - Rinsing with mouthwash that contains alcohol.
 - Using lemon glycerin mouth swabs.

Call your doctor if you experience:

- Sores in mouth or on lips that make it difficult to eat, drink, or sleep.
- Pain or any sign of infection.
- Thick coating on tongue or in mouth.
- Worsening symptoms.

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