



Getting Help for Mouth Sores

Mouth sores are a common side effect of cancer treatment. You may hear this problem called stomatitis or oral mucositis. Mouth sores can be caused by chemotherapy and by radiation therapy. You might have soreness, or cracks or ulcers can form. These mouth sores can become infected and can bleed. They often get worse over time and can be very painful. They can make it hard for you to eat, drink, or even talk.

Good mouth care is key.

Regular mouth care is the best thing you can do for your mouth during cancer treatment. Start taking care of your mouth before it gets sore. If your mouth does get sore, good mouth care can help keep it from getting infected.

Talk to your doctor.

Ask your doctor what kind of mouth care you should do. Certain cancer treatments are more likely than others to cause mouth sores. And there are many kinds of mouthwashes and medicines used to prevent mouth sores.

Look at the inside of your lips and mouth and the top and bottom of your tongue every day. Look for cracks, ulcers, white or yellow patches, or red spots.

Tell your doctor about any changes in your mouth. There are things that can be done to help sores heal and keep them from getting worse. Some treatments are mouth rinses or gels you swish and spit or swallow. These may make your mouth numb, or coat and protect your mouth for a short time. Steroids, antibiotics, antihistamines, pain medicines, and other drugs may also be used.

What you can do if you have mouth sores:

To take care of your mouth:

- Use a mouth rinse that your health care team suggests.
- Do not use mouthwashes that contain alcohol.
- Keep your mouth clean. Brush your tongue, gums, top of your mouth, and teeth with a soft toothbrush within 30 minutes after eating and at bedtime. If the toothbrush hurts, ask about trying sponge-tipped swabs.
- Ask if it is OK to floss.
- If you wear dentures, wear them only during meals.
- Keep your lips and mouth moist with a water-based mouth moisturizer. Try to drink fluids often and use a cool mist humidifier at night.
- If you have pain, take your pain medicines as directed.

When you eat:

- Try to eat a well-balanced diet.
- Do not eat spicy foods.
- Stay away from hard or crunchy foods.
- Do not drink acidic fruit juices, like orange, grapefruit, and tomato. These can cause burning.
- Eat bland, soft foods.
- Try warm food and drink; both hot and cold can cause pain.

Talk to your doctor if:

- Your mouth bleeds. Put pressure on the site with a cloth dipped in ice water or rinse your mouth with ice water.
- You have a fever of 100.5° F or higher.

- The mouth sores get worse, bleed, or you have trouble swallowing.
- You have trouble eating or taking your medicines.

What you can do to prevent mouth sores:

To take care of your mouth:

- Rinse your mouth at least 4 times a day and at bedtime. Ask your doctor or nurse what kind of rinse you should use. Swish it around in your mouth for about 2 minutes.
- Use a soft toothbrush and dip it in warm water to make the bristles softer.
- Brush your tongue, gums, top of your mouth, and teeth within 30 minutes after eating and at bedtime.
- If it is OK with your doctor, floss once a day after brushing.
- If you wear dentures, remove and brush them. Also make sure they fit well and do not wear them overnight.
- Keep your mouth moist (sugarless candy and gum helps).
- Keep your lips moist with lip balm, petroleum jelly, or cocoa butter.

When you eat:

- Try to eat a well-balanced diet.
- Drink a lot of fluids between meals.

Talk to your doctor:

- Ask if you are likely to get mouth sores and what you can do to prevent them.
- Tell them about any mouth changes or sore throat.

