

Maintaining Oral Health During Cancer Chemotherapy

Just as periodontal health can affect your overall health, certain health conditions and their treatments can affect your periodontal health. One of these is cancer therapy.

If you or someone you know has been diagnosed with cancer, it is essential to make the periodontist or dentist a member of the cancer team. Cancer therapy can cause oral complications that compromise periodontal health, so a visit to your dental professional is important to help you keep your gums healthy during this difficult time. It may also prevent complications during your cancer treatment. According to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR), of the 1.2 million Americans diagnosed with cancer each year, approximately 400,000 will develop oral complications from their treatments. Unfortunately, many patients do not receive oral care until serious, painful complications develop.

Oral Complications

Common side effects of chemotherapy, radiation to the head and neck, and bone marrow transplantation can negatively impact your overall health and quality of life. Radiation and chemotherapy kill cancer cells, but can also affect normal cells as well, including the cells in the mouth. Complications can vary depending on the individual and the type of treatment. These problems can become so significant that your treatment plan may be altered to reduced doses or discontinued entirely.

Oral complications from radiation, bone marrow transplantation or chemotherapy include:

- Inflamed gums, mouth ulcers and infection
- Dry mouth
- Difficulty speaking, chewing and swallowing
- Dental decay or erosion of the tooth's enamel and root
- Loss of taste sensation
- Jaw stiffness
- Delayed healing

Pretreatment Evaluation

Prior to beginning your cancer treatment, an oral evaluation by a periodontist or knowledgeable dental professional is important. Identifying and correcting potential oral problems may ease discomfort so it does not intensify or interfere with your cancer treatment. Oral surgery is not recommended during cancer therapy, because tissues take more time to heal. This is why pretreatment is essential.

Pretreatment care also provides the following benefits:

- Reduces the risk and severity of oral complications during cancer chemotherapy
- Reduces the chances of oral pain and ultimately may protect oral health
- Allows for timely diagnosis and treatment of existing infections
- Improves the chances of receiving optimal doses of cancer treatment
- Improves overall health

Daily Oral Hygiene Routine

In addition to pretreatment care, your periodontist or dental professional likely will recommend an at-home oral hygiene routine. Daily oral hygiene will provide comfort, reduce the risk of infection by periodontal bacteria, and minimize the effects of complications caused by your cancer treatment. In addition to the oral hygiene routine tailored by your dental professional, the following are helpful tips to keep your mouth as comfortable and healthy as possible:

- Gently brush your teeth, gums and tongue with a soft-bristled toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste after every meal and before bed. If brushing hurts, soften the bristles in warm water.
- Floss teeth gently every day temporarily avoiding areas if gums are sore or bleeding.
- Typical fluoride applications may be prescribed by your dental professional. Fluoride applications will fortify the enamel to help it resist decay caused by decreased saliva production during radiation therapy.
- For a sore mouth, rinse a few times a day with one cup of warm water mixed with 1/4 teaspoon baking soda and 1/8 teaspoon salt. Follow with a plain water rinse.
- Avoid candy and soda unless it is sugar-free. Also avoid using toothpicks, tobacco products and alcohol.

Caring for Dry Mouth

Chemotherapy and radiation can decrease your salivary secretion causing excessive dryness in the mouth. And, a dry mouth could increase your susceptibility to oral infections. Keep your mouth moist and stimulate saliva flow by:

- Sipping cool water often
- Allowing ice chips to melt in your mouth
- Chewing sugarless gum or candy
- Lubricating your lips with lip balm
- Asking your dental professional for a prescription saliva substitute or medication that may stimulate saliva
- Using a humidifier in your bedroom
- Avoiding mouthwashes that contain alcohol, acidic, and carbonated or caffeinated beverages because these chemicals will dry out your mouth.

Follow-Up and Long-Term Care

Relationships with your periodontist and dental professionals are as important after your cancer therapy as they were before and during your treatments. These continued relationships will help you maintain a comfortable, confident smile for years.

The American Academy of Periodontology