Mouth Care during Chemotherapy and/or Radiation Therapy
Patient Education

Chemotherapy and/or radiation therapy is meant to damage or kill fast-growing cancer cells; however, normal cells can also be fast growing and can be damaged by these treatments. The lining of your mouth, throat, tongue, and gums are often affected by these treatments causing tender gums, mouth sores, soreness in the throat, and possible pain or bleeding in the mouth and throat. This is called mucositis.

Approximately 40% of people with cancer develop symptoms of mucositis. Most people will begin developing symptoms about two weeks after treatment starts. Symptoms may get worse during treatment, but they will slowly get better when treatment is over.

Full prevention of these symptoms may not be possible, but there are ways to decrease the intensity of symptoms. Here are some techniques to decrease symptoms of mucositis.

Keep Mouth and Teeth Clean:

- Gently brush your teeth at least twice a day with a soft bristled toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste.
  - If your mouth hurts, use an oral sponge swab (toothette) instead of a toothbrush and clean your mouth after each meal and at bedtime.
- Rinse your mouth well.
- Floss at least once a day, unless your physician tells you otherwise.
  - Do not floss if this is painful for you.

Homemade Mouthwash: Baking Soda/Salt Rinse

- Recipe: Mix one quart (4 cups) of water with one teaspoon salt and one teaspoon baking soda.
- Swish and gargle well for 15 to 30 seconds and then spit out.
  - If you have a mild sore mouth, rinse every 2 to 3 hours.
- You may be advised to increase rinses to once every hour if your mouth is very sore.
- You may also dip your oral sponge swabs in this for cleaning your teeth if toothpaste irritates your mouth.
Stanford Mouthwash (prescription required)

- Swish and gargle well for 15 to 30 seconds and then spit out.
- Use as prescribed by your physician.

Fluoride Toothpaste/Mouthwash

- Avoid commercial mouthwashes that contain alcohol as they may burn your mouth.
- If you have dentures, a bridge, or a dental prosthesis, remove and clean your prosthesis each time you clean your mouth.
  - Leave your prosthesis out while you sleep.
  - If your mouth becomes irritated, keep your prosthesis out of your mouth as much as you can.

To Decrease Dryness:

- Biotene (alcohol-free) mouthwash can be used to decrease dry mouth.
  - When using Biotene, be sure wait at least 30 minutes after use until you eat, drink, or use any other mouth care products.
  - This product will not work as well to decrease dryness, if anything else is used or put in your mouth before 30 minutes.
- Artificial saliva is available over the counter in many pharmacies.
  - This product may be used as often as necessary and may be swallowed.
- Use a humidifier at home, especially at night.
  - Be sure to change the water of the humidifier daily and clean as directed.

To Lessen Pain and Soreness:

- Eat small and frequent meals focusing on high calorie and protein foods. Liquid nutrition supplements can also be helpful.
  - Aim to have something high in calorie and/or protein every 2 hours if you cannot tolerate larger meals.
- Avoid spicy, dry, and/or coarse foods.
  - Avoid acidic or citrus fruits and juices as they may irritate your mouth when you have more sores.
- Eat soft, moist, bland foods taken in small bites and chewed well.
  - Use sauces and gravy to soften food and increase calories, if needed.
- Drink at least 2 to 3 quarts of water and non-irritating drinks (such as sports drinks.) Take frequent sips of liquids throughout the day.
  - You may find it helpful to carry a bottle with you.
- Use a water based lip balm to prevent lips from drying and cracking.
- Avoid alcohol and tobacco products such as cigarettes, cigars, pipes, or chew.
  - These are very irritating and drying to a sore mouth.

When to Contact your Doctor or Nurse:

- If you have a fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher.
- If you are unable to eat or swallow due to pain.
• If your current pain medication is not helping or your pain is getting worse.
• If you have severe nausea and vomiting which you cannot keep anything you eat or drink down
• If you notice white patches in your mouth.
• If your gums or mouth bleed longer than usual or will not stop bleeding.

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