

# Oral pain (Oral Mucositis) fact sheet



## What is oral mucositis

Oral mucositis (OM) is an inflammatory condition in the mouth. It is a frequent and unpleasant side effect of radiation and chemotherapy. The condition causes redness, mouth sores and ulcers that can be very painful, making it difficult to eat, drink and speak. Oral mucositis can lead to several problems, including nutritional deficiencies or hospitalization as a result of an inability to eat and an increased risk of infection due to open sores in the mouth. It may even interfere with your cancer treatment.<sup>1,2</sup>

## What causes oral mucositis

Chemo and radiation therapy, the two most common cancer treatments, are designed to destroy abnormal cells, but can also affect healthy cells, like those in your mouth.<sup>3</sup> That's why the majority of cancer patients undergoing chemo and radiation therapy will experience at least some degree of oral mucositis.

## Symptoms of oral mucositis

The symptoms of oral mucositis usually appear a few days after starting chemotherapy and towards 2nd and 3rd week of radiotherapy. They can vary in severity and progress very quickly. Some people say it feels like 'massive sunburn' inside their mouth. If you experience any of the symptoms listed below, inform your doctor or nurse immediately:

- Burning sensation in your mouth
- Swelling in your mouth or on your tongue
- Dry mouth

- Bleeding
- Difficulty speaking
- Difficulty swallowing
- Difficulty drinking or eating, reduced sense of taste
- Changes to the inside lining of your mouth – redness, white patches, blisters or ulcers
- Trouble sleeping due to oral pain
- Fever or other signs of infection

## What are the consequences of OM?

If untreated, oral mucositis (OM) can have serious consequences and can significantly affect your cancer treatment, quality of life and your physical and emotional well-being. It is important not to overlook the signs of mucositis, as the treatment should start as soon as possible in order to avoid possible complications.

- Cause severe oral pain
- Make eating and drinking a series challenge, which can lead to malnutrition and dehydration, which in turn can lead to intravenous feeding
- Increase the risk of infections
- Contribute to delay or interruption of your cancer therapy
- Necessitate an increase in the use of antibiotics and narcotics
- Lead to hospitalisation
- Increase the overall cost of treatment

Unfortunately, you may not be able to prevent mucositis, but there are steps you can take to help you to relieve oral pain.

## Oral hygiene tips<sup>3</sup>

### It is very important to keep your mouth clean

Brush your teeth and tongue gently after each meal and at bedtime, using:

- A soft toothbrush or electric toothbrush
- A mild toothpaste containing fluoride

Rinse your mouth and dentures after you eat, or brush your teeth, using either:

- ¼ teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda in 1 cup of warm water or
  - ¼ teaspoon salt in 1 cup of warm water
  - an alcohol-free mouthwash
- Take your dentures out when you don't need them, and clean them well after using them
- If your mouth is too sore to brush, or you have bleeding when you brush, then just rinse your mouth as described above
- Remember, DO NOT use mouthwash that contains alcohol

## Tips to help with mouth problems

### Keep your mouth clean

- Start mouth care at the beginning of your treatment.
- Clean your mouth and teeth regularly (see information under Oral hygiene tips above).

### Protect your mouth

- Cut down or stop smoking.
- Keep your mouth and lips moist using lip balm, sucking on ice chips or sipping water.
- If your mouth is dry, try using artificial saliva, sugarless lollies, and oral moisturisers.

### Check your mouth

- Use a mirror and bright light to look inside your mouth every day for sores, red or white areas, or bleeding.

### Look after your teeth

- See a dentist to have any dental problems fixed before you start your cancer treatment.
- Tell your dentist you are having cancer treatment at each visit.

### Managing pain

- Take your pain medicine as prescribed, particularly before meals.

### Eating and drinking

- Choose foods that are soft, moist, and easy to swallow, such as rice, mashed potatoes, scrambled eggs, and yoghurt.
- Use gravies and sauces to moisten foods.
- Don't eat crunchy, acidic or spicy foods.
- Don't drink alcohol or sour juice.
- Avoid food and drink that is very hot or cold.

## Controlling oral mucositis pain

Pain caused by oral mucositis can be very distressing and have a significant physical and emotional impact. You lose your taste for food, your voice and your sense of social and emotional well-being. However, there are steps you can take to help relieve the pain.

There are many different treatments used to prevent or treat mucositis, including topical anaesthetics, mouthwashes and coating agents. Patients may also require comprehensive pain management and antibiotics. Remember to always consult your doctor or nurse first as they will be able to examine your mouth and identify the best treatment option.

### References

1. Murphy, B. A. (2007) Clinical and economic consequences of mucositis induced by chemotherapy and/or radiation therapy. *J Support Oncol*, 5(9 Suppl 4):13–21.
2. Vera-Llonch, M., Oster, G., et al. (2006) Oral mucositis in patients undergoing radiation treatment for head and neck carcinoma. *Cancer*, 106(2):329–336.
3. Evi Q Cancer Treatments Online: Mouth problems during cancer treatment. NSW Government, Cancer Institute NSW. Created May 2015. <https://www.eviq.org.au/getmedia/bdae5c1e-d40a-4161-8edf-6688457cf559/English-Mouth-Problems-During-Cancer-Treatments.pdf.aspx?ext=.pdf>