



Getting Help for Mouth Sores

Mouth sores can be a common side effect of cancer treatment. You may hear this problem called stomatitis or mucositis. You might have soreness, or little cuts 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, swallow, drink, or even talk.

What to look for

- Sores in the mouth that may be red, or may have small white patches in the middle. These sores can be painful or uncomfortable when you chew, or feel like a sore throat. The sores may bleed or become infected.
- Small ulcers, swelling, or bleeding in the mouth, on the gums, or on or under the tongue
- A white or yellow film, patches, or pus in the mouth or on the tongue
- Increased mucus in the mouth
- Feeling of dryness, mild burning, or pain when eating hot and cold foods
- Heartburn or indigestion

What causes mouth sores in people with cancer?

Mouth sores can be caused by chemotherapy, targeted therapy, some immunotherapy, and radiation treatments to the head and neck area. Other things may also cause mouth sores: certain infections, dehydration, poor mouth care, oxygen therapy, alcohol or tobacco use, or a lack of certain vitamins or protein.

Dental checkups and mouth care

Dental checkups before treatment, and especially before head and neck radiation therapy, can help prevent and minimize mouth sores. Dentists can help show you how to care for your mouth and can treat cavities or oral infections before cancer treatment starts. It's important to talk to your health care team about the best treatment for your situation.

Good mouth care is key to helping reduce the risk or severity of mouth sores. Using a soft toothbrush or foam swab can help keep your mouth clean and reduce the risk of injuring your gums and lining of the mouth.

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.

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.
- Drink at least 8 cups of fluids each day, if your health care team approves.
- Certain types of rinses can help keep your mouth clean and can help soothe discomfort. Mouth rinses with antibiotic agents or steroids might be recommended, depending on how severe the mouth sores are.
- Ask if it is OK to floss.
- If you wear dentures, you may be instructed to remove and clean your dentures between meals on a regular time schedule, and to store them in cleansing soak.
- Keep your lips moist with petroleum jelly, a mild lip balm, or cocoa butter.
- If you have pain, take your pain medicines as directed.

When you eat

- Eat soft, moist foods that are easy to swallow.
- Do not eat foods that are very salty, spicy, or sugary.
- Eat small, frequent meals of bland, moist, non-spicy foods. Do not eat raw vegetables and fruits, and other hard, dry, or crusty foods, such as chips or pretzels.
- Do not drink acidic fruit juices, like orange, grapefruit, and tomato. These can irritate the mouth.
- Avoid fizzy drinks, alcohol, and tobacco.

Talk to your doctor if

- You have redness in your mouth that lasts for more than 48 hours.
- You have a fever. Your health care team will let you know what temperature a fever is.
- You have bleeding gums.
- You notice any type of cut or sore in your mouth.
- You have white patches on the tongue or inside your mouth.
- You have trouble eating food or drinking fluid for 2 days.
- You have trouble taking your medicines because of mouth sores.

Treatment of mouth sores

Although more research is needed to find the best treatment plan to manage mouth sores and pain, some options might include good mouth care and mouth rinses, reducing treatment doses, cryotherapy, or laser therapy.

Talk to your health care team

Tell your health care team about changes you notice in your mouth. Let them know what you have trouble with, or things that make your mouth sores feel worse or better.

Tell your friends or loved ones what they can do to help. You might be able to cope better with their support and understanding.

For cancer information, day-to-day help, and emotional support, call the American Cancer Society at **1-800-227-2345** or visit us online at **www.cancer.org**. We're here when you need us.

