

# Caring for your mouth



## Information for patients

Weston Park Cancer Centre



**PROUD TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

SHEFFIELD TEACHING HOSPITALS NHS FOUNDATION TRUST



## **Caring for your mouth**

Mouth problems can occur in patients with cancer and haematology conditions for a number of reasons. This leaflet tells you about some of the common causes of mouth problems, how to prevent and spot them and what to do if they occur.

## **What can cause mouth problems?**

### **Cancer treatment**

Chemotherapy drugs and radiotherapy to the head and neck area can affect your mouth in a number of ways. They can:

- cause the inside of the mouth, tongue and throat to become red, sore and ulcerated
- increase the risk of oral infections, particularly oral thrush, also known as candidiasis
- lead to taste changes
- make it difficult to swallow, eat and drink

Radiotherapy for head and neck cancer can also reduce saliva production and make the mouth dry.

Mouth problems from chemotherapy can occur at any time during the course of treatment.

Mouth problems from radiotherapy to the head and neck area start to happen about two weeks after treatment begins. The symptoms will get worse during treatment and then gradually improve in the weeks following radiotherapy.

## Medication

Many drugs can increase the chance of developing mouth problems.

- Medication that you may be taking can cause dry mouth e.g. painkillers and anti-sickness medication
- Antibiotics change the balance of bacteria that live in your mouth making it easier for an infection to occur, e.g. oral thrush
- Steroids can reduce your ability to fight infection

## Other factors

Those particularly at risk of developing problems with their mouth include people who:

- Are not able to eat and/or drink very much
- Are breathless and/or on oxygen
- Need help to look after their mouth
- Have other conditions such as diabetes

## How can I reduce the chances of developing a problem with my mouth?

### If you are having cancer treatment

Your oral health and hygiene need to be as good as possible **before** the start of treatment to avoid problems later. The following can help reduce the chances of you developing a problem:

- A dental check up with your dentist is needed **before** starting chemotherapy or head and neck radiotherapy.
- Ask your dentist to contact the doctors who provide your cancer treatment before any dental treatment is carried out. You may need to be referred to the Dental Hospital by your doctor or dentist.

## Advice for all cancer patients

Every day you should check your whole mouth including your lips and tongue in the morning before brushing your teeth. Look for the following problems:

- sores and ulcers
- white spots
- pain
- coated or "furry" tongue
- cracked lips
- unusual bleeding

Keep your mouth clean:

- Brush your teeth and gums twice a day. The best times to do this are last thing at night and on one other occasion. Use a toothbrush and fluoride toothpaste. Use a soft toothbrush and brush gently if you have a sore mouth.
- Spit out the toothpaste foam after brushing. Do not rinse away toothpaste with water. Fluoride found in toothpaste and mouthwashes is anti-bacterial and protects teeth against tooth wear and decay.
- Rinse your mouth with water after each meal. This will wash away any food particles left in your mouth.
- If you use a steroid inhaler you should also rinse your mouth with water after you have used it.
- Your doctor may prescribe a mouthwash to use during your treatment.

Toothpaste should contain at least 1400ppm (parts per million) fluoride. This information is written on the toothpaste packet. If you are having radiotherapy you may be given a different toothpaste as you go through your treatment.

If you wear dentures you will need to remove them before you carry out your mouth check.

- Rinse your dentures carefully after each meal under running water to remove food particles.
- Clean your dentures at least twice daily with a toothbrush and unperfumed soap in a sink of warm water.
- Unless advised otherwise, dentures should be left out at night to give your mouth a rest.

If you have a mouth infection your dentures may need treatment too. Dentures can be disinfected with Milton sterilising fluid or chlorhexidine digluconate mouthwash (Corsodyl or Periogard).

## **What should I do if I get a mouth problem?**

The following section contains some advice on simple things you can do if you develop any of these problems.

### **Taste changes or loss of taste**

You may find that your sense of taste changes or that the texture of food seems different. If you are having chemotherapy, you may notice a metallic taste in your mouth after treatment. Sometimes food may feel as if it has no taste at all.

### **What can I do if I have taste changes?**

- Eat food that you enjoy rather than food that does not appeal to you. You may find your sense of taste changes every few weeks so the foods you enjoy may change.
- Try seasoning food but be careful with spicy and acidic foods if your mouth is sore or painful.
- **Please ask your doctor, nurse or radiographer for advice.** Patients having radiotherapy will have a review each week to assess their mouth and any problems they may be having.

## **Sore mouth**

If you get a sore mouth you may find it uncomfortable to eat, speak, swallow and brush your teeth.

### **What can I do if I get a sore mouth?**

Follow the mouth care routine described earlier as far as possible.

Try specialised fluoride toothpaste that can be bought over the counter, such as:

- one for dry mouth e.g. BioXtra toothpaste
- an unflavoured toothpaste e.g. OraNurse
- one that is SLS (sodium lauryl sulphate) free.

These will contain less irritating ingredients than most standard toothpastes.

Contact the hospital for advice on mouthwashes. They may recommend Benzydamine mouthwash (Difflam). This has a numbing effect that can help before eating or tooth brushing. They may also suggest using a mouthwash or gel that provides a protective coating for the inside of your mouth.

You may need other medication:

- If you have a thrush infection this will need to be treated
- If your mouth is painful you may need to take painkillers to control this, particularly if it is making it difficult for you to eat or drink.

### **Please ask your doctor, nurse or radiographer for advice.**

Hard and crispy foods, acidic foods or drinks or spicy foods can also make a sore mouth more painful. Avoid alcohol and tobacco. They will increase mouth dryness and can irritate. Smoking during radiotherapy will increase side effects such as a sore mouth; it can also make the treatment less successful.

## Dry mouth

A dry mouth is caused by a reduction in the production of saliva. Saliva moistens the mouth and protects the gums and teeth. It helps to break food down and is important for eating.

### What can I do if I have a dry mouth?

Follow the mouth care routine described earlier as far as possible.

- Sip still water, plain milk or sugar-free tea between meals.
- Chew sugar-free chewing gum.
- A number of products have been developed to help with a dry mouth. Ask your doctor, nurse or radiographer about products that are recommended.
- They may recommend to try:
  - saliva substitutes which are available over the counter or on prescription from a doctor or dentist e.g. BioXtra oral gel.
  - high fluoride toothpastes and alcohol-free fluoride mouthwashes.
  - other specialized dry mouth products such as saliva stimulation lozenges.
- If your lips are dry (but not broken) you can try lip-salve or lip balm. BioXtra oral gel can also be used on your lips.

Avoid drinking a lot of fizzy, fruit-flavoured or sugary drinks. Acidic or sugary drinks can wear away your teeth making them sensitive and more prone to tooth decay. If you do want to drink acidic and sugary drinks it is better to have them as part of a meal. They should be avoided before bed time when saliva is reduced.

## **Difficulty with dentures**

Lack of saliva or a sore mouth can make dentures uncomfortable, however leaving your dentures out during cancer treatment can make them difficult to wear when you need to use them later. Head and neck radiotherapy can cause swelling in the mouth which may mean that changes need to be made to your dentures to help them fit comfortably.

### **What can I do if I am having difficulty with my dentures?**

- Follow the mouth care routine for your mouth and dentures as described earlier as far as possible.
- See your dentist if your dentures are painful.

## **Difficulty swallowing**

This is more likely to happen in patients being treated with head and neck radiotherapy but it can occur for other reasons.

- Dryness and soreness of the mouth can make swallowing difficult. If you are finding it difficult to eat or drink during your cancer treatment you must tell your doctor, nurse or radiographer.
- If you are coughing when eating or drinking or feel that food or drink are 'going down the wrong way' it may not be safe for you to continue to eat or drink. Please tell your doctor, nurse, speech therapist or radiographer straight away.
- You may be referred to a speech and language therapist for a swallowing assessment or a dietitian for further advice.

## **What can I do if I am having difficulty swallowing?**

- Include plenty of sauces and gravy with meals. Softer, moister foods are easier to swallow.
- As long as you are not coughing when eating/drinking, try to keep swallowing something, even sips of water or your saliva. Try to have a drink with every meal and take sips between mouthfuls of food if your mouth feels dry. Avoid dry foods such as biscuits and crackers. Chocolate pieces and pastry can stick to the roof of your mouth.
- A dry mouth can lead to a change or reduction in sensation in your mouth. Check after meals for any food residue and clear this away by rinsing with water.
- If you are coughing when eating or drinking ask your doctor, nurse or radiographer to refer you to a speech therapist for a swallowing assessment.

If you are having radiotherapy to the head and neck area and your doctor feels there is a high risk that you will develop swallowing problems they may suggest placing a feeding tube into your stomach before your treatment begins. This may be used to supplement what you eat and drink and to help you to receive the nutrition you need.

If you have any mouth problems please contact your dentist, GP or the hospital as soon as possible. If you are having chemotherapy or radiotherapy, contact the hospital first.

## Contact numbers

### Patients attending Weston Park Hospital

If you are receiving chemotherapy or have been an inpatient:

Telephone:

- **0114 226 8345**
- **0114 271 2733**

Ask to speak to the assessment unit nurse at Weston Park Hospital

If you are receiving radiotherapy:

- Telephone: **0114 226 5282** (Monday to Friday between 9.00am and 5.00pm) to speak to the information and support radiographers.
- Telephone: **0114 226 8345 or 0114 271 2733** (outside the above hours) and ask to speak to the assessment nurse practitioner at Weston Park Hospital.

### Haematology patients attending ward P3, O2 day case:

If you are attending O2 Haematology Day Case Unit:

- Telephone: **0114 271 3607**  
(Monday to Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm, Saturday 8.00am to 4.00pm)
- Telephone Nurse in Charge - Ward P3: **0114 271 3626**  
(At all other times and if you have been treated on a ward as an inpatient)

## Sources of further information

Further information is available from:

### **Weston Park Cancer Information and Support Centre**

23 Northumberland Road  
Sheffield S10 2TX

- [www.cancersupportcentre.co.uk](http://www.cancersupportcentre.co.uk)
- Email: [info@cancersupportcentre.co.uk](mailto:info@cancersupportcentre.co.uk)
- Tel: **0114 226 5391**

### **Macmillan Cancer Support**

- [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)
- Macmillan Support Line free **0808 808 00 00**  
(Monday to Friday, 9.00am - 8.00pm)



**Sheffield  
Hospitals  
Charity**

To help support your local hospitals visit  
**[sheffieldhospitalscharity.org.uk](https://sheffieldhospitalscharity.org.uk)**

Registered Charity No. 1165762

**Alternative formats can be available on request.  
Please email: [sth.alternativeformats@nhs.net](mailto:sth.alternativeformats@nhs.net)**

**© Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust 2020**

Re-use of all or any part of this document is governed by copyright and the "Re-use of Public Sector Information Regulations 2005" SI 2005 No. 1515. Information on re-use can be obtained from the Information Governance Department, Sheffield Teaching Hospitals. Email [sth.infogov@nhs.net](mailto:sth.infogov@nhs.net)