

Understanding Mouth Sores During Cancer Treatment

Mouth sores, also known as mucositis or stomatitis, are a common side effect of some cancer therapies. They can cause discomfort and affect your ability to eat, drink, and speak. Knowing what to expect and how to care for your mouth can help manage symptoms and prevent complications.

What Are Mouth Sores?

Mouth sores are painful ulcers or red patches that develop inside your mouth. They can appear on your cheeks, lips, gums, tongue, palate, or floor of your mouth. These sores may cause swelling, redness, and soreness, making everyday activities uncomfortable.

Factors That Increase the Risk of Mouth Sores

Certain conditions and behaviors can make you more likely to develop mouth sores:

- Poor dental hygiene
- Ill-fitting dental prosthetics like dentures, bridges, or implants
- Gum diseases or infections (fungal, bacterial, or viral)
- Existing mouth wounds or cuts
- Dehydration
- Smoking
- Medications such as opioids, steroids, antidepressants, antihistamines, or decongestants

What You Might Experience

Common symptoms of mouth sores include:

- Pain or burning sensation in the mouth or throat
- Red patches inside the mouth
- Small sores on the tongue or gums
- Swelling of the lips or mouth
- White spots or coating inside the mouth
- Difficulty eating, drinking, or talking
- Mouth sores usually develop within 1 to 2 weeks after starting cancer treatment. They may heal on their own or require specific treatment from your care team.

How You and Your Care Team Can Prevent or Reduce Mouth Soreness

- **Salt and Baking Soda Rinse:** Swish and spit with a mixture of salt, baking soda, and warm water every 4 hours.
Mix: Half a teaspoon of salt and one teaspoon of baking soda in an 8-ounce glass of warm water.
- **Keep Your Mouth Moist:** Use over-the-counter products designed for dry mouth to stay hydrated and protect your mouth.
- **Lip Care:** Keep lips soft using water-soluble, lanolin, or oil-based lip balms.
- **Gentle Oral Hygiene:** Use a soft-bristle toothbrush or soften your brush's bristles by running it under hot water to avoid further irritation.
- **Oral Cryotherapy:** If you're receiving intravenous cancer drugs, ask your healthcare team about using ice chips in your mouth for 20 to 30 minutes during treatment to reduce mouth sores.
- **Avoid Irritants:** Steer clear of alcohol (including mouthwashes with alcohol), tobacco, and spicy, hot, acidic, or rough foods. Instead, opt for soft, bland foods that are easy to chew.
- **Prescribed Mouthwashes:** Your care team may recommend special mouthwashes to help with pain relief and healing.
- **Routine Dental Care:** Consider regular dental check-ups to maintain oral health and prevent issues.

When to Contact Your Care Team

Call your healthcare provider if you experience:

- Severe or persistent pain or discomfort
- White patches, ulcers, or sores that don't heal

- Difficulty swallowing or speaking
- Signs of infection, such as swelling, redness, or pus

Summary

Mouth sores are a common but manageable side effect of cancer treatment. Proper oral hygiene, avoiding irritants, and following your care team's advice can help reduce discomfort and promote healing. Always communicate any mouth-related concerns promptly to ensure your health and comfort during therapy.

Your mouth is important—taking care of it helps you feel better and keeps your treatment on track.

Notes

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