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# Oral health during cancer treatment

**C**ancer treatments can affect all parts of your body, including your mouth. Also, your oral health can make a difference in how your cancer treatment proceeds. An unhealthy mouth can increase the risk of developing oral adverse effects, often called “side effects,” to cancer therapies and can even interfere with treatment.

## HOW CAN MY DENTIST HELP?

Your dentist can be an important part of your treatment team. He or she can help you begin those treatments with a healthy mouth and may be able to help relieve oral side effects of treatments.

During cancer treatment, painful sores can develop in your mouth, which can interfere with speaking and eating. Dry mouth is another possible side effect. This can be a problem because, in addition to causing discomfort, it can increase your risk of developing caries (tooth decay). Saliva washes away food particles from your teeth, which helps reduce that risk. Your dentist may give you an artificial saliva that will make you more comfortable and help protect your teeth.

Cancer and its treatments can weaken your immune system, which can make you more likely to develop infections. If an infection becomes serious enough, your physician may need to change or even stop your cancer treatment until the infection resolves. Because you are prone to developing infections during this time, you should start your treatment with a healthy mouth. Having a dental examination and completing any necessary treatment before starting cancer treatment are ideal. Your dentist can treat gingival (gum) disease, tooth decay or other infections involving your teeth.

Some cancer treatments can increase your risk of developing tooth decay. This is especially true for people who have head or neck cancer. Radiation treatments for head and neck cancer can result in dry mouth, which increases your risk of developing tooth decay. To reduce this risk, your dentist may give you special trays that fit in your mouth. These trays are used to apply a fluoride gel regularly to your teeth

during cancer treatment. Fluoride helps strengthen and protect your teeth.

## WHAT CAN I DO?

Steps you can take to maintain a healthy mouth include

- brushing your teeth twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste;
- cleaning between your teeth every day with dental floss or another product made to clean between your teeth;
- stopping use of tobacco products;
- rinsing your mouth after vomiting with one-fourth teaspoon of baking soda in 1 cup of warm water;
- moistening a dry mouth by drinking water, sucking on ice, chewing sugar-free gum or sucking on sugar-free candies, avoiding mouthrinses that contain alcohol and asking your dentist about artificial saliva;
- looking for dental products that display the American Dental Association’s Seal of Acceptance. The ADA Seal appears on toothbrushes, toothpastes, mouthrinses, dental floss and other tools for cleaning between your teeth, as well as on chewing gum. The Seal tells you that the product has met the ADA’s standards for safety and effectiveness—and that it does what the package says it does.



Talk with your dentist about any problems you are having with your mouth. Because he or she specializes in caring for your teeth and gums, your dentist can help limit the oral problems that may arise during cancer treatment. Include your dentist on your treatment team by telling him or her about your cancer diagnosis and treatment and by giving him or her the name and telephone number of the physician who is treating you for cancer. ■

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