

Living With and Beyond Cancer Information Sheet

12. Sore or Dry Mouth

A dry and sore mouth can be a symptom of the cancer and its treatment (eg radiotherapy to the head or neck and/or chemotherapy). It may also be related to problems with diet and eating. Both chemotherapy and radiotherapy can make it more difficult to fight off bacterial, viral and fungal infections within the mouth. If the soreness is caused by radiotherapy treatment, the symptoms tend to be worse towards the end of the treatment and can last for 6 weeks after treatment has finished. Soreness might also be caused by ulcers in the mouth. Mouth sores are extremely painful and unpleasant, and can be easily infected due to the large number of germs that are present in the mouth. Chemotherapy can make such infections difficult to treat; prevention is therefore important.

How can I manage my sore mouth?

- If in doubt, ask your hospital doctor, GP, nurse or radiographer to examine your mouth for signs of infections that can be remedied with suitable medication. Bacteria, viruses and fungal infections can lead to a sore mouth and oral thrush.

What can I eat or drink?

- Choose soft foods or add extra sauces and gravy to your food
- Avoid alcohol – wines and spirits in particular will irritate sore areas
- Try to drink [nutritional supplements](#) in addition to food
- Foods that are not of a smooth texture, such as mince and cereals, can get caught in sore areas; smooth foods, such as egg custard or blancmange, will slip down more easily
- Avoid very hot foods; try warm, cool or frozen foods and drinks to see which temperature is most comfortable
- Rough and sticky foods are hard to eat, so avoid foods like bread, crispbread, peanut butter and doughnuts
- Salty, acidic and spicy foods will irritate sore areas; avoid curry, chillies, pepper, tomato sauces, oranges and other citrus fruits, vinegar, and crisps
- Soup is generally very salty and low in energy. If you want soup choose creamy, smooth (blended) ones, such as cream of chicken, or Build Up/Complan soups. Let the soup cool before trying it
- General advice for soothing a sore or dry mouth is to drink plenty of fluids, avoid acidic, salty, spicy food which might make symptoms worse, keep food moist with sauces and gravies, avoid rough textured food and try eating cold food. Also drinking through a straw might be easier.
- If dentures are worn then leaving them out for as long as possible might be beneficial. However, if you are having radiotherapy to the jaw, you may be requested to leave your dentures in as long as possible.

I have a dry mouth what can I do?

- For a dry mouth chewing gum can stimulate saliva. Lip balm or Vaseline might be helpful for dry

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lips though should not be used during radiotherapy. Seek advice from the radiographers if having radiotherapy.

- If a dry mouth is causing immediate discomfort, sucking on ice cubes, ice lollies or hard boiled sweets or chew sugar free chewing gum can relieve symptoms
- Dry foods should be moistened with gravy, butter or other sauces to reduce dryness in the mouth and to prevent any further tissue damage in the mouth.
- Visit your dentist regularly to prevent mouth problems. During chemotherapy, gums can become very sensitive and care should be taken to brush teeth and gums after every meal using a soft toothbrush to avoid mouth tissue damage. It is also advised that rinsing your mouth out with warm salt water can reduce any minor mouth sores. A dentist can also advise the best way to brush and floss your teeth during chemotherapy.
- Use mild medicated mouthwashes that are alcohol free or ones that contain sodium bicarbonate

What can I eat and drink if I have a dry mouth?

- Sip cool drinks frequently to help moisten your mouth. It will help if those drinks contain energy or protein – milkshakes, hot milky drinks, fizzy drinks, fruit juices and fruit squash (hot or cold). As mentioned above sucking ice cubes may also help
- Choose soft, moist foods that have sauces, gravy, custard, cream or syrups with them
- Avoid sticky, chewy and dry foods such as bread, cold meat and chocolate
- Bread, crackers and biscuits can be dipped into liquids such as tea, coffee & milk to make them easier to swallow
- Some people find sucking sweets, sugar-free chewing gum or eating citrus fruits helps them produce saliva. Take care with strong citrus flavours if your mouth is sore

If there is an unpleasant taste in your mouth:

This can be due to medication you are taking or to treatment but it would be sensible to see your oral hygienist to make sure it's not caused by a problem with your teeth or gums.

- Try sucking fruit sweets or mints to mask the taste
- Concentrate on the foods that you can manage most easily
- If you are avoiding a lot of foods ask if you can be referred to the dietician for more advice

If everything tastes bland:

Sometime food may taste like cardboard or have no taste at all. This is usually associated with extreme dryness following radiotherapy.

- Choose foods that are highly flavoured and try to increase the flavour and aroma of your food using spices, marinades, pickles, etc.
- Add textures to your food, such as crushed crisps over savoury dishes or sprinkle chopped nuts on desserts. This may be difficult if your mouth is too dry after treatment
- Combine different temperatures together, such as hot fruit pie and cold ice cream

If eating food is very difficult then supplementary drinks will be useful to ensure you get the nutrition you need. These drinks may be taken in place of food or in addition to your usual meals. They are available in a wide variety of flavours and as milk shake-style drinks or juice / squash supplements. Your dietician can advise you how many liquid nutritional supplements you need to consume each day.

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- Resources/Information

Local Resources:

Other Resources:	Dentist, GP, oncology doctor, Clinical Nurse Specialist and dietician
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National Resources:

Find a Dentist https://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/Dentists/LocationSearch/3	If you don't currently have a dentist you can find one via this website
The Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust https://www.royalmarsden.nhs.uk/	Eating well when you have cancer booklet which can be downloaded from the website
Macmillan Cancer Support Line www.macmillan.org.uk Call 0808 808 00 00 7 days a week 8:00am—8:00pm	Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones plus all mobile networks. Please note that calls to this number are not free when made from outside the UK. If you are calling from outside of the UK call on +44 207 091 2230
Macmillan on-line Community	Online support— to share experiences or vent your emotions find others who understand—join today!
Marie Curie Support Line Living with a terminal illness and looking for support www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/marie-curie-support	Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones plus all mobile networks. The Support Line is open Monday to Friday - 08:00am – 6:00pm Saturday -11:00am – 5:00pm

Other Resources :

Macmillan Booklets:	Recipes for people affected by cancer MAC15201_E06_N
	Healthy Eating and Cancer MAC12143
	Side effects of cancer MAC12921_E04_N
Marie Curie Booklets:	Mouth Care
	Keeping Your Mouth Healthy