

# Keeping your mouth healthy during cancer treatments



Cancer treatments can cause discomfort or side effects in your mouth, teeth or gums. This fact sheet tells you what you can do to help prevent or relieve these effects.

Follow these suggestions as long as you are having treatments. Continue for at least a month after your last treatment.

## What oral side effects might I have?

Cancer treatments can cause one or more of these side effects:

- dry mouth
- thicker saliva
- thick-feeling tongue
- pain or burning sensation in the mouth
- changes in how food tastes or loss of taste
- problems with drinking or eating
- white spots in the mouth or on the tongue
- ulcers (small sores in the mouth)
- difficulty talking because of dry mouth or pain



## Why might my mouth be affected by my treatments?

Various factors could increase your risk of having such side effects. Some examples are:

- different types of cancer treatments
- number and intensity of treatments
- radiation therapy to a particular part of the body
- poor oral hygiene (not brushing your teeth or gargling often enough, etc.)
- your body's natural defenses that are weakened
- poor eating habits
- lack of water from drinks or food (dehydration)
- medications
- breathing through your mouth
- being treated with or using oxygen



**Regular oral hygiene is the best way to prevent any discomfort, infections, or ulcers in the mouth caused by your treatments.**

## How should I take care of my mouth?

### Lips

- Take care of your lips by applying a balm made with glycerin, mineral oil (such as Glaxal Base), or vitamin E. Choose a lip balm with no flavours, colours, or medicated ingredients. If you're having radiation therapy to the head and neck area, do not apply lip balm for 2 hours before your treatment.

### Teeth

- Brush your teeth 3 or 4 times a day if you can.
- Use a toothbrush with flexible bristles.
- Use toothpaste for sensitive teeth (e.g. Colgate Sensitive Pro-Relief, Biotene or Sensodyne).
- Don't floss. If you wish to do so, first check with your doctor to see if it's possible.
- Use an alcohol-free mouthwash (e.g. Oral-B alcohol-free).
- Stop using fluoride tray treatments if you feel any pain. Once your ulcers have healed, you can resume treatments.

### Dentures

- If you wear dentures, clean them after every meal with a toothbrush and water.
- Remove your dentures overnight and soak them in a commercially available soaking solution.

**Don't wear your dentures if they're not properly adjusted or you have ulcers. If possible, have them adjusted before starting treatment.**

### Gums

**Rub grapeseed oil on your gums with a finger. Do not drink the oil and do not gargle with it.**

## What should I do if I have dry mouth?

- Add bouillon, gravy or other liquids to your meals to make them softer.
- Take frequent sips of water.
- Suck on ice cubes, popsicles, or sugar-free candies.
- Chew sugar-free gum (e.g. xylitol or sorbitol).
- Use artificial saliva. However, you need to continue doing the other hygiene measures.

## What should I do if it hurts to eat or swallow?

- Eat room temperature or warm food. Avoid hot or cold food.
- Avoid food that's acidic, salty, spicy or carbonated.
- Avoid alcoholic drinks, tobacco, and caffeine.
- Take small mouthfuls.
- Rinse your mouth with the following **homemade mouthwash** at least 4 times a day, as recommended by your care team. Avoid commercial mouthwashes. If you're being treated for cancer in the head or neck area, rinse your mouth at least 10 times a day, especially if you have ulcers.





## Homemade mouthwash

### 1st recipe:

Mix:

- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 litre water

### 2nd recipe:

Dissolve 1/2 teaspoon of salt in 250 ml of water.

This mouthwash can be kept for 24 hours at room temperature. After that time, make a new batch.

## What should I do if it still hurts after that?

Talk to a member of your caregiving team, who can:

- make an appointment for you to see a nutritionist, who can suggest food that's easier to eat
- recommend a medication or mouthwash to help with the pain

## What signs should I watch for in my mouth?

Tell a member of your caregiving team right away if you have one of these symptoms:

- pain or a burning feeling in your mouth
- trouble drinking or eating
- white spots or redness in your mouth or on your tongue
- ulcers (small sores in your mouth)
- being unable to drink or eat for 24 hours

- trouble talking
- bleeding
- leaking
- fever

## Where should I go for help or answers to my questions?

If you have questions, feel free to contact a member of your care team. They will be glad to offer guidance.



### USEFUL RESOURCES

Canadian Cancer Society:

- > 1 888 939-3333
- > [cancer.ca](http://cancer.ca)

National Cancer Institute (U.S.):

- > [cancer.gov](http://cancer.gov)

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available (in French only). Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our web site [chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante](http://chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante)

*The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.*

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal  
[chumontreal.qc.ca](http://chumontreal.qc.ca)



## Questions

Write down any questions you want to ask your care team so you don't forget anything.






## Observations - Comments

Write down observations you feel are important : your symptoms, treatments, follow-up, energy level, spirit, etc.






## Upcoming appointments


