University College Hospital

Care of the mouth after radiotherapy treatment

Radiotherapy Department
Patient information series

No 35
If you need a large print, audio or translated copy of the document, please contact us on:

020 3447 3711 (Direct line)
020 3456 7890 ext 73711/bleep 1458
0845 155 5000 ext 73711/bleep 1458

We will try our best to meet your needs.
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Introduction
This booklet describes some of the side effects you may experience after radiotherapy treatment to your mouth, and provides information and advice on how to deal with these side effects. The side effects are usually at their worst towards the end of treatment and in the month afterwards. The reactions will improve gradually after that.

Dry mouth
Saliva moistens your mouth and protects against tooth decay. The radiation damages the glands which produce saliva. This reduces the amount of saliva made. Saliva production improves over the months following treatment. However, it may not return to normal entirely.

• Try to sip drinks as often as possible. Avoid sweet/fizzy drinks which cause tooth decay—use diet drinks instead.
• Suck ‘sugar-free’ pastilles/diabetic sweets, chewing gum.
• Try using saliva substitutes. These are available on prescription for severe cases of dry mouth. (e.g. Luborant®, AS Saliva Orthana® sprays or pastilles.)
• Avoid alcohol and caffeine drinks as these increase the dryness of the mouth.

Sore mouth
Radiotherapy damages normal cells in the mouth. The inside of your mouth, tongue and gums may become red, sore and ulcerated. You may find it uncomfortable to eat, speak or brush your teeth. Soreness may also be due to a thrush infection.

• Use warm salt-water mouthwashes: one teaspoon of salt to one litre of water.
• If you cannot brush your teeth, you can use foam swabs with toothpaste.
Tooth decay can spread very quickly if you have less saliva, which protects teeth.

- Brush your teeth gently with a soft tooth brush and fluoride toothpaste.

- Apply a fluoride gel such as OMNI Gel™ or Gel-Kam®. Discuss this with your dentist.

- Try to cut down on the amount of sugary foods between meals. You need to eat foods high in energy such as pasta, bread, rice, yams, potatoes. If you are losing weight seek the advice of a dietician.

- Visit your dentist or hygienist regularly.

Difficulty opening the mouth

Difficulty opening the mouth: the muscles which open the mouth can become very tight. You may find it difficult to open your mouth wide.

- Gently exercise your jaw by opening your mouth as wide as possible and holding for a few seconds, then relax.

- You may be given special appliances to help you increase the opening of your mouth.

- The speech and language therapist will provide you with stretching exercises to undertake to relieve this condition, or if they are started early, can prevent it.
Loss or change of taste
Taste buds are affected by radiotherapy. This usually recovers within three to four months after the end of radiotherapy. However, a small percentage of patients may have a permanent loss of taste or altered taste perception.

The dietitian will be able to provide advice on maintaining a nourishing healthy diet.

Difficulty swallowing
This is due to soreness in the throat caused by radiotherapy.

• Discuss the need for painkillers with your doctor or nurse.
• Eat moist food and have drinks with your food.

Swelling of the tongue
You may not notice slight swelling of your tongue and cheeks, which is a reaction to the treatment. This could make you bite your tongue and the inside of your cheeks.

Be very careful when eating or drinking not to bite your tongue or cheeks. Eat slowly.

Dentures
If you wear dentures you may find them uncomfortable and sore.

• See your dentist if you are unable to wear your dentures.
• You should always clean your dentures with a brush after every meal.
• Leave dentures out at night and soak them in diluted antiseptic solution.
Useful contact numbers

Local

The Radiotherapy Mould Room
Direct telephone: 020 3447 3729
Main switchboard: 0845 155 5000
   ext 73729/bleep 2222, 5825 or 2075
Alternative switchboard: 020 3456 7890
   ext 73729/bleep 2222, 5825 or 2075

Macmillan Information and Support Radiographer
Mark Williams
Direct telephone: 020 3447 3711
Main switchboard: 0845 155 5000
   ext 73711/bleep 1458
Alternative switchboard: 020 3456 7890
   ext 73711/bleep 1458
Email: mark.williams@uclh.nhs.uk

Clinical Nurse Specialists:

Khalda Meer
Direct telephone: 020 7380 6941
Main switchboard: 0845 155 5000
   bleep 7198
Alternative switchboard: 020 3456 7890
   bleep 7198
Mobile: 07535 647736
Email: khalder.meer@uclh.nhs.uk

Lynda Farmer
Main switchboard: 0845 155 5000
   bleep 5810
Alternative switchboard: 020 3456 7890
   bleep 5810
Mobile: 07535 647737
Email: lynda.farmer@uclh.nhs.uk
National Health Talk Online
Website: www.healthtalkonline.org

Macmillan Cancer Support
Cancer Line freephone: 0808 808 0000
Monday to Friday, 09:00 to 21:00
Textphone: 0808 808 0121
Monday to Friday, 09:00 to 18:00
Email: cancerline@macmillan.org.uk
Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

National Library for Health
Covers all aspects of health, illness and treatments
Website: www.library.nhs.uk

NHS Direct
Telephone: 0845 4647
Available 24 hours
Website: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

NHS 24
Telephone: 08454 242424
Website: www.nhs24.com

NHS Choices
Website: www.nhs.uk

Patient UK
Comprehensive, free, up-to-date health information
Website: www.patient.co.uk
Space for notes and questions