

Mouth and Throat Issues

What is it?

Your mouth and throat may become red, irritated, and sore after a few weeks of radiation therapy to the head and neck areas. This is called mucositis. Some chemotherapy drugs may also cause *mucositis*.

Another severe side effect of this type of radiation is chronic dry mouth, or *xerostomia*, the result of damage to the salivary glands. Xerostomia can make it difficult to talk, chew, or swallow. A lack of saliva can also cause tooth decay and infection.

What are the symptoms?

- Red, irritated, sore mouth and throat
- Weak, hoarse, or different sounding voice
- Thick saliva
- Extremely dry mouth
- Pain
- Infection
- Gagging, difficulty swallowing, nausea
- Loss of appetite, changes in taste
- Gagging, nausea
- Weight loss, fatigue, dehydration
- Swelling of neck tissues
- Stiff jaw; difficulty opening the mouth widely
- Difficulty wearing dentures, dental problems
- Increased sensitivity of mouth and tongue
- Difficulty speaking for long periods of time

How is it diagnosed?

Mouth and throat problems are diagnosed based on a complete medical history and examination and a description of your symptoms.

How is it treated?

Your doctor may recommend topical anesthetics or analgesic for pain relief, antifungal agents to prevent fungal infections, and certain medications to improve saliva production and help with mucositis. These include:

For xerostomia:

- Ethyol® (amifostine)
- Salagen® (pilocarpine)
- Evoxac® (cevimeline)
- Urecholine® (bethanechol)

For mucositis:

- Milk of magnesia/Maalox to coat your mouth
- Benadryl rinse
- Sucralfate rinse



TIPS

Tips to Help

The following can help you manage mucositis:

- Get a thorough dental exam before beginning radiotherapy and chemotherapy, and correct any existing dental problems.
- Talk to your dentist about a topical fluoride treatment to use during radiation therapy.
- Drink at least six to eight glasses of water a day, unless otherwise directed.
- Use cough drops, cough medicine, and throat sprays to keep your mouth and throat moist.
- Use a cool air vaporizer to keep the air moist.
- Don't smoke and stay away from people who smoke.
- Elevate your head and upper body when sleeping so you can breathe more easily.
- Wear light, loose clothing around your neck.
- Avoid foods that may irritate your mouth and throat.
- Brush your teeth with a soft toothbrush and rinse your mouth frequently.
- Eat moist foods at room temperature or cold.
- Suck on ice chips or Popsicles.
- Keep lips moist with petroleum-based lip balm.
- Rinse your mouth frequently.

Words to Know

Mucositis: Red, irritated, and sore mouth.

Xerostomia: Chronic dry mouth.