

# Mouth Sores

## What are they?

The cells that line your mouth and throat are rapidly dividing cells, thus they're subject to damage from chemotherapy and radiation therapy. This damage can cause inflammation, dryness, and sores in your mouth and throat called *mucositis*. Although mouth sores can occur with any treatment for cancer, it is more severe with:

- Stem cell transplants
- Radiation for head and neck cancer
- Combined chemotherapy and radiation therapy
- High-dose treatment

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of mouth sores include:

- A burning sensation followed by ulcers or sores
- A red, dry, and inflamed mouth
- Difficulty chewing, swallowing, and talking

## How are they diagnosed?

Mouth sores are diagnosed upon physical examination. It is important to let your health care providers know about any mouth or throat problems because they could affect your ability to eat and make you more susceptible to infection. They may also delay treatment to allow time for your mouth to heal.

## How are they treated?

Mouth sores usually heal in a week to 10 days when the next layer of cells lining your mouth or throat develops. In the meantime, they can be treated by:

**Medications.** These include:

- Salagen® (pilocarpine): a drug that stimulates the flow of saliva.
- Kepivance™ (palifermin): a synthetic growth factor produced in a laboratory and designed to protect the cells in the mouth and gastrointestinal tract from mucositis.
- Ethyol® (amifostine): a drug that protects against the damage of radiation to the head and neck.
- Medicated mouthwashes prescribed to soothe your mouth as it heals. Some mouth rinses have numbing medicine, such as lidocaine and Benedryl®, to help numb the mouth to make swallowing easier and to control pain.
- Sucking on ice chips, also called cryotherapy, while receiving treatment. This helps by decreasing blood flow to the cells in the mouth, reducing exposure to the chemotherapy drug which may decrease the risk of developing mouth sores.



TIPS

## Tips to Help

To help prevent or reduce the effects of mouth sores:

- Inspect the inside of your mouth every day. Look for signs of redness and sores, as well as any changes in your teeth, tongue, and lining of the mouth.
- Before starting chemotherapy or radiation to your head and neck, see your dentist. Have your teeth cleaned and checked for any potential problems, such as cavities or gum disease.
- Practice good oral care. Frequently rinsing your mouth with salt water and brushing your teeth gently with a soft toothbrush after every meal and before bed will keep your mouth moist, refreshed, and clean.
- Avoid mouthwashes with alcohol because they can cause dryness, irritation, and a burning sensation in your mouth.
- Eat foods that feel comfortable in your mouth. Soft foods require less chewing. Cold or room temperature foods are usually well tolerated. Avoid spicy, salty, or citrus foods that can irritate a sore mouth.

## Words to Know

**Cryotherapy:** Use of ice to help prevent mouth sores.

**Mucositis:** Inflammation, dryness, and sores in your mouth and throat.