

Consumer Handout | Canberra Health Services

Self-care for patients receiving head and neck radiotherapy

Radiotherapy to the head and neck area may cause your mouth, throat, upper digestive tract, and skin to become inflamed and sore, and damage your salivary glands. This is known as mucositis and can be very painful.

From the first day of your radiotherapy treatment follow the steps below to help manage these side effects.

Mouth side effects

Radiotherapy can cause pain, sores and ulcers in the mouth and throat which can affect your ability to eat and drink. Mouth care products will be provided on your first day of radiotherapy. To help lessen these side effects:

1. Brush your teeth and tongue gently after each meal and at bedtime using a soft, small head toothbrush or mouth swabs and mild toothpaste containing fluoride. Make sure you spit out the toothpaste. If you have dentures, you need to remove your dentures when not using them and always clean them after use.
2. Use sodium bicarbonate mouthwash at least 4 times a day, for example after every meal and before bed. You can make your own mouthwash by using 1 cup of warm water and ¼ teaspoon of bicarbonate soda. Place 20mls of mouthwash into your mouth and swish around your mouth for 30 seconds then spit out. **Do not gargle mouthwash** or use mouthwash that contains alcohol.
3. Use dry mouth spray if your mouth feels dry. If your speech pathologist says it is safe to do so, you can drink water as normal or sip water to help with your dry mouth.

Oral thrush can sometimes develop during treatment. A nurse will examine your mouth weekly for signs of thrush. If signs of thrush are present you will be given Nystatin Oral drops with instructions on how to use the drops.

Skin side effects

Radiotherapy can cause skin changes and damage to healthy skin in the treatment field. To help lessen these side effects:

1. Moisturise your lips with a non-petroleum-based lip balm
2. Apply the supplied cream to the skin of the area that you are having treated. Apply the cream twice a day, but not during the hour before your radiotherapy treatment.

What to do

- Attend your weekly nurse review so that we can monitor your weight, skin and mouth changes, and assess your pain.
- Continue to sip water if it is safe to do so.
- Always protect your skin from the sun.
- Discuss any concerns you have about pain, nausea or constipation with the radiation oncology nurses.

What not to do

- Gargle mouthwash or use mouthwash that contains alcohol.
- Go in the sun while you are having radiation treatment, without covering up. Use sunscreen on the treatment area during radiotherapy.
- Eat or drink spicy or acidic food or drinks as these may irritate your mouth and throat.

Contact

You can contact the Radiation Oncology Nurses if you have questions on 51242217



Acknowledgement of Country

Canberra Health Services acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as traditional custodians of the ACT and recognises any other people or families with connection to the lands of the ACT and region. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and contribution to the life of this region.



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