

Oral Health During Cancer Therapy



From the American Academy of Periodontology



Certain cancer treatments can have side effects that may compromise the health of your gums. Understanding how to reduce impact on your gums is the first step to maintaining periodontal health during cancer therapy.

Pretreatment Evaluation and Oral Hygiene Routine

It is important to visit your periodontist for a comprehensive periodontal evaluation before undergoing any type of cancer treatment. Identifying and correcting potential problems in your mouth may prevent them from intensifying or interfering with chemotherapy or radiation. In addition to pretreatment care, your periodontist will likely recommend a daily oral hygiene routine to provide comfort, reduce the risk of infection, and minimize the effects of the complications caused by the cancer treatment.

Oral Complications

Common side effects of cancer treatments (including chemotherapy, radiation to the head and neck, and bone marrow transplantation) can have a negative impact on your oral health.

Radiation and chemotherapy kill cancer cells, but they can also hurt normal cells. Side effects vary for every person, but common oral complications include inflamed gums and mouth ulcers, dry mouth, erosion of tooth enamel, loss of taste, jaw stiffness, and delayed healing.

Although pretreatment and daily oral hygiene can go a long way toward keeping your mouth healthy and comfortable during cancer treatment, it may be difficult to keep side effects at bay. Chemotherapy and radiation can decrease your salivary secretion, causing excessive dryness in the

mouth and increasing your susceptibility to infection. Therefore, it is important to keep your mouth moist by sipping cool water, melting ice chips in your mouth, chewing sugarless gum, applying lip balm to your lips, and using a humidifier in your bedroom to reduce oral dryness at night.

Protecting the enamel (outer surface) of your teeth is important if you're experiencing dry mouth or vomiting.

Your periodontist may prescribe fluoride trays, which will prevent the tooth enamel from wearing away due to vomiting or increased oral bacteria from dry mouth. You may also want to consider asking your oncologist to prescribe anti-nausea medication during your cancer therapy to treat nausea and vomiting.

Oral Cancer

The American Cancer Society estimates that more than 49,000 Americans will be diagnosed with some form of mouth or throat cancer in 2017.

Oral cancer can affect any area of the oral cavity including the lips, gum tissues, cheek lining, and the hard or soft palates. Risk factors include all forms of tobacco use and the heavy use of alcohol.

As with many forms of cancer, early detection can improve the chances of successful treatment. By seeing a periodontist regularly and by being aware of any changes in your mouth (including sores, lumps, and trouble moving your jaw or tongue), you're taking an active role in detecting signs of oral cancer early.