

Maintaining Oral Health During Cancer Therapy

Cancer therapy can cause oral complications that compromise periodontal health, so a visit to your periodontist is important to help keep your gums healthy during this difficult time.

Oral Complications

Common side effects of cancer treatments such as chemotherapy, radiation to the head and neck, and bone marrow transplantation can negatively impact your overall health and quality of life. Radiation and chemotherapy kill cancer cells, but they can also hurt normal cells. Complications vary for every person, but common complications include:

- Inflamed gums and mouth ulcers
- Dry mouth
- Difficulty speaking, chewing, and swallowing
- Erosion of tooth enamel
- Loss of taste
- Jaw stiffness
- Delayed healing

Pretreatment Evaluation and Daily Oral Hygiene Routine

Before beginning your cancer treatment, an oral evaluation by a periodontist is important. Identifying and correcting potential problems in your mouth may prevent them from intensifying or interfering with your cancer treatment. In addition to pretreatment care, your periodontist will probably recommend a daily oral hygiene routine. This routine will provide comfort, reduce the risk of infection, and minimize the effects of the complications caused by the cancer treatment.

Special Considerations

Even though pretreatment and daily oral hygiene can go a long way toward keeping your mouth healthy and comfortable during cancer treatment, sometimes it is hard to keep the negative effects at bay.

Chemotherapy and radiation can decrease your salivary secretion causing excessive dryness in the mouth, and a dry mouth can increase 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.

If a dry mouth or vomiting is a side effect of your cancer treatment, then it is important to protect your enamel (the outer surface of the tooth). Your periodontist can prescribe fluoride trays, which will prevent the tooth enamel wearing away as a result of 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.

The relationship with your periodontist is as important after your cancer therapy as it is before and during your treatments. This continued relationship will help you maintain a comfortable, confident smile for years.



Oral Cancer

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), more than 30,000 Americans are diagnosed with mouth and throat cancers each year. Oral cancer can affect any area of the oral cavity including the lips, gum tissues, cheek lining, and the hard or soft palate.

As with many forms of cancer, early detection can improve the chances of successful treatment. By taking a few minutes to examine your entire mouth, you're taking an active role in detecting signs of oral cancer early.

To minimize the risk of developing oral cancer, avoid all forms of tobacco and heavy use of alcohol.

The American Academy of Periodontology Patient Page is a public service of the AAP and should not be used as a substitute for the care and advice of your personal periodontist. There may be variations in treatment that your periodontist will recommend based on individual facts and circumstances. Call 1-800-FLOSS-EM or visit perio.org for more information on periodontal disease.