

MUCOSITIS: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Prevention and Treatments

Prevention will not stop mucositis from occurring, but it can help alleviate some pain and lessen some of the side effects and symptoms of mucositis. It is important to be educated about mucositis, how to take care of yourself and to have a good relationship with your physician and dentist.

The first step in prevention is to see if your doctor can recommend a dentist that deals with cancer patients. You will need to have your teeth and gums evaluated and if you wear dentures, you will need to make sure they fit properly. If any work is needed (teeth extractions or refitting of dentures), it should be completed at least one month prior to starting therapy to make sure your mouth has completely healed and prevent damage to your existing teeth, gums or jaw bones.

The next step to taking care of your mouth is proper brushing techniques and oral hygiene. If you smoke, it is extremely important that you stop smoking. Your doctor will be able to help you with smoking cessation programs. You should use a soft bristle toothbrush and brush your teeth 2 to 3 times daily (after eating). If necessary, due to sensitivity or mouth sores, you may need to use foam toothbrushes with an antibacterial rinse. You should choose mild tasting toothpaste with fluoride: for example Prevident®. Some flavorings in toothpaste may irritate the mouth. *If your toothpaste is still too irritating, you can use a solution made of 1 teaspoon of salt dissolved in 4 cups of water.* You should gently floss your teeth once daily.

If you develop mucositis or it worsens, you may need to increase brushing to every 4 hours and at bedtime. This will help keep the mouth moisturized and help prevent any infections. It is important to brush and floss very gently. You will want to rinse your mouth frequently to prevent cavities with antiseptic mouth rinses, for example: Peridex® or Periogard®. *You can make your own rinse by mixing 1 teaspoon of baking soda in 8 ounces of water or ½ teaspoon salt and 2 tablespoons dissolved in 4 cups of water.* If you are being treated with high dose chemotherapy or a bone marrow transplant, your doctor can give you some new medication that can prevent or shorten the duration of mucositis.

Your mouth may become dry and you will want to keep it moisturized. This can be due to a decrease in your saliva production or the mucositis directly. Some easy remedies include chewing ice chips, chewing sugarless gum, or sucking tart candy. If these do not work there are artificial saliva products that your physician can prescribe for you or some over-the-counter products are available such as Oral Balance®. Since your saliva barrier is compromised you should avoid eating or drinking products containing sucrose to prevent cavities.

Pain is also a very serious complication of mucositis. Aspirin containing products and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory products like Motrin® or Naprosyn® should be avoided due to their effect on platelets, which can increase the risk of bleeding. You can also use topical products like Orajel® or some prescription products like viscous lidocaine or a new product called Gelclair®. If the pain becomes more severe you may need your doctor to prescribe you stronger pain medications, such as Vicodin®, Percocet® or Tyco #3®. *To help clean oral sores you can rinse with a solution consisting of 1 part 3% hydrogen peroxide with 2 parts of saltwater (1 teaspoon of salt dissolved in 4 cups of water).*

Saliva helps protect the mouth and gums from infection. These infections can be bacterial, fungal or viral in nature. For mild fungal infections, topical oral suspensions or dissolving tablets can be prescribed. You will need to swish or dissolve the medicine in your mouth and depending on your doctor's directions, either swallow or spit out the medicine. It is important to not use any medicine containing alcohol because it will burn the mouth. For worsening fungal, bacterial and viral infections, your physician will need to prescribe oral medications, such as antibiotics, to eradicate them. You should also remove any dental appliances and soak them in antiseptic solutions (Listerine® or Peridex®).

Nutritional Tips

These nutrition tips will help if you are experiencing dehydration, taste changes, decreased appetite or pain with eating.

1. Eat small frequent meals throughout the day.
2. Try to have a balanced diet to maintain energy and your immunity.
3. Avoid spicy, hot or cold foods if it is painful to eat or you are having nausea. Eat food that is a little bland and at room temperature.
4. Drink lots of fluid, broth or drinks like Gatorade. This will keep you hydrated.
5. Eat food high in calories and protein to maintain weight and nutrition. Take vitamins and minerals.
6. If your mouth is too sore, eat soft or blended foods like ice cream, pudding, soup, and applesauce.
7. Zinc supplements may help with taste changes.
8. Some prescription medications are available to help increase appetite like Megace® or Marinol®.
9. Avoid your favorite foods when you are receiving chemotherapy. You may develop a taste aversion to them by association.
10. Use spices or flavoring to make your food taste better. Eat whatever you can tolerate to maintain weight.

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