

Your Mouth Care

For Head & Neck Oncology patients

You have a lot going on and maybe everyday things like daily tooth brushing does not seem like a top priority. Looking after your mouth is more important than ever, especially if you are having radiation therapy treatment to your head and neck area.

Keep going with your twice daily brushing, including very gently brushing your gums. Some people find their electric toothbrush is too much during treatment, if so, use a soft manual toothbrush instead.

Brushing

Use a **soft toothbrush** with the smallest head you can find. A child-sized brush has extra-soft bristles, or Colgate's Cushion-Clean is another good option. Use gentle "jiggle" motions without pressing hard, especially on your gums.

If it feels sore to brush, try softening the bristles using hot water first (then put on toothpaste). Use **Diffiam** rinse or spray we have provided (for some numbing effect) before brushing.

Please let us know if you are not managing to use your toothbrush. We can find alternative methods to help you, however toothbrushes are the best tool for removing plaque biofilms (communities of bad bacteria that grow on your teeth). Any other method used would be a short-term solution only.

Note: If your treatment includes surgery for a resection such as a mandibulectomy or glossectomy, please follow the oral cleaning advice from your oncology team. You can start brushing again when wounds have healed.

Toothpastes

Most toothpastes contain fluoride, this is excellent for helping control the plaque/harmful bacteria that can cause disease of your teeth and gums.

Most toothpaste also contain **SLS (sodium lauryl sulphate)**, this makes your toothpaste foam, but can cause more drying and irritation to your mouth.

Options for fluoride-containing, SLS-free toothpastes are:

- Oral 7 Moisturising toothpaste, Chemist Warehouse is likely cheapest
- Grin Natural Kids Berry-licious with fluoride toothpaste. Note: This is suitable for adults
- Colgate Sensitive PRO_Relief (But only Repair & Prevent)
- Sensodyne Daily Care (avoid other variants)

If you find your mouth is burning try this toothpaste with Vitamins E & B5 at Chemist Warehouse or online at smilestore.co.nz Xerostom Dry Mouth toothpaste

If you find toothpaste flavours become too strong try: Oranurse unflavoured toothpaste, online at toothshop.co.nz

Flossing

If you are a regular flosser or interdental brush user, try and keep using them. Stop if gum bleeding increases or it becomes sore. Wood toothpicks should not be used.

Some find flossers on handles are often easier than regular floss.

Note: If you don't normally floss or use interdental brushes please do not start trying this during your treatment to avoid bleeding from your gums.

Mouthwashes

If you are a mouthwash user, **please stop using them** during treatment. Many contain ingredients that can make your mouth feel worse. We will provide or advise you of suitable alternatives, as needed, throughout your treatment.

Mucositis

This is a common side effect during treatment that affects the lining of your mouth and throat (lining = mucosa, it is = inflammation). During treatment your saliva may stop producing and a dry mouth makes you more susceptible to painful ulcers, infections and irritation inside your mouth. If the mucositis is severe, it could even interrupt your planned treatment sessions.

Oral infections may lead to systemic infection or sepsis.

These guidelines will help you manage the potential side effects of mucositis during treatment:

- One of the most effective ways is to make a salt and baking soda mouth rinse.
- Start using this rinse even before chemo or radiotherapy begins – it may not feel like it is “doing” anything, but it is soothing the lining of your mouth, helps remove food, and keeps your teeth protected from acidic attacks. The salt helps to break down thick saliva.

Salt & Baking Soda Mouth Rinse Recipe

- Once your Radiotherapy/chemo treatments have started rinse EVERY HOUR: just 2-3 small mouthfuls each time.
- Use a 1 litre jug or bottle (with lid); add 1 teaspoon of regular salt and 1 teaspoon of baking soda (or sodium bicarbonate) to 1 litre of warm water. Shake bottle well before each use, sip, and hold in your mouth/swish for at least 30 seconds & spit out.
- Any leftover at the end of the day should be thrown out. Make a new mixture daily.
- If you find the rinse begins to sting the reduce the amount of salt.
- Try not to stop using this rinse during treatments.
- After radiotherapy treatment has finished continue to rinse with baking soda, especially after meals or as mouth feels dry.
- After treatments have finished you may prefer to use a cup or glass for your rinse after meals. Measure $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ of regular salt and $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of baking soda. Dilute into a full glass (250ml) of plain warm water, stir then sip, swish and hold in mouth for as long as possible, then spit.

Denture care

If you wear dentures, please remove them every night (if not already doing this). Brush with a toothbrush that hasn't had toothpaste on it. Clean using a mild soap, rinse, and soak denture in plain water overnight. This will help remove debris and prevent oral thrush, a fungal infection.

We may sometimes prescribe a medicine to treat a fungal infection and/or a cleanser for your denture.

Oral Thrush

When your immune system becomes compromised you are more susceptible to fungal infections, commonly known as Oral Thrush. If diagnosed, we would prescribe a medicine to treat this infection so it doesn't take over inside your mouth.

Other Dry Mouth Products & Suggestions

- We provide samples of Oral 7 mouth rinse, gel & toothpaste to help relieve some symptoms of dry mouth, and help protect your teeth and mouth lining.
- Just before bedtime brush your teeth as usual, and then apply a pea-sized amount of Oral 7 gel to inside the lips, cheeks, and gums with your fingertip. Avoid drinking or rinsing for a minimum of 30 minutes after applying.
- During the night, if needed, sip plain still water only.
- Try sugar-free gum (chew for no more than 10-15 minutes) to stimulate saliva.
- Try gum, or pastille/lozenge containing a natural sugar called Xylitol (pronounced Zy-litol) from health shops or online. Xylitol is a great food source for your good bacteria in our mouths – the bacteria we want to encourage! The nasty bacteria can't digest xylitol so slows plaque growth on your teeth. Xylitol can stimulate saliva too.
- Oracoat Xylimelts is a product that contains xylitol and adheres to your gum slowly dissolving over 4-5 hours. Available online or at Bargain Chemist.
- Avoid acidic, spicy, sharp or crunchy foods (including sucking vitamin C lozenges), that may cause damage to the delicate lining of your mouth.
- Sip plain water frequently throughout the day; avoid fizzy or carbonated water that can damage your teeth long term.
- Protect your lips, preferably using a water-soluble lip balm however DO NOT apply before radiotherapy treatment.
- You may also find relief using DentaMed gel (online) or the Xerostom range.
- You can try Biotene however it no longer contains the enzymes that used to make it an effective product.

A NOTE ABOUT SMOKING / VAPING: When smoking/vaping is continued during and after your radiotherapy, it can increase the severity and duration of mucositis, and makes dry mouth worse, potentially affecting a good outcome.

After Radiotherapy Treatment

Expect your mouth to feel dry and sometimes uncomfortable/painful for some time after your treatments have finished. Please keep looking after your mouth, teeth & gums.

It's important to keep using the baking soda rinses and sipping plain water regularly. Dry mouth contributes to increased tooth decay.

Approximately 6-8 weeks after completing your treatment we will offer you a follow up appointment with the hospital dentistry team in Auckland.

You will see a dentist and/or oral health therapist to provide dental treatment as needed, and create a plan to help you manage your oral health.

It is very important that you tell your regular dentist, or any dental visits you attend in future, that you have received radiotherapy to your head and neck region. This may affect their ability to provide some dental work, especially the removal of teeth.

Please ask if you have any specific questions or concerns regarding your mouth care.

Nga mihi

**Mucositis and Dry Mouth multi-disciplinary team and
Auckland Regional Hospital & Specialist Dentistry, Te Toka Tumai Auckland**