

**Mouth sores (oral mucositis)** are a **common and painful side effect** of many cancer treatments, especially **chemotherapy** and **radiation to the head or neck**. They can make eating, drinking, and speaking difficult, and increase the risk of infection.

Here's what you need to know:

---



## Why Mouth Sores Happen During Cancer Treatment

### 1. Chemotherapy

- Targets fast-dividing cells—including the healthy cells lining your mouth.
- Can lead to inflammation, ulceration, and soreness (usually 5–10 days after treatment begins).

### 2. Radiation Therapy (especially to the head/neck)

- Damages the mucous membranes directly, especially after repeated treatments.

### 3. Targeted Therapies / Immunotherapies

- Some can also cause dry mouth or inflammation, though this is less common.

### 4. Weakened Immunity

- Makes it harder for the body to heal or fight secondary infections (bacterial, viral, fungal) in the mouth.
- 



## Symptoms of Mouth Sores

- Redness, swelling, or ulcers inside the cheeks, lips, tongue, or throat
- White patches or film (can be **oral thrush** if fungal)
- Pain or burning, especially when eating

- Dry mouth or cracked lips
  - Bleeding gums or bad breath
  - Difficulty swallowing
- 



## When to Call Your Cancer Team

You should contact your doctor if:

- You **can't eat or drink** due to pain
  - Sores are **bleeding, worsening, or infected**
  - You have a **fever** or suspect oral thrush (white patches)
  - You're **losing weight** due to poor intake
- 



## How They're Treated

### 1. Pain Relief

- **Prescription rinses** like "magic mouthwash" (can include lidocaine, diphenhydramine, and antacids)
- **Topical gels** (benzocaine or mucosal coatings)
- **Systemic pain meds** if severe (e.g., opioids)

### 2. Infection Control

- **Antifungal** (nystatin, fluconazole) for thrush
- **Antiviral or antibiotic** if other infections develop

### 3. Mouth Care Routines

- Rinse with **salt + baking soda + warm water** (1/4 tsp of each in 1 cup)
  - Avoid alcohol-based mouthwashes
  - Use a **soft-bristled toothbrush** or sponge swab
  - Keep lips moist with non-irritating balm
- 



### Eating Tips

- Choose soft, bland, lukewarm foods (yogurt, mashed potatoes, smoothies)
  - Avoid spicy, acidic, or crunchy foods
  - Use straws to bypass sore areas
  - Stay hydrated with sips of water throughout the day
- 



### Prevention Tips (If You're Starting Treatment Soon)

- Visit your dentist before starting chemo/radiation
  - Practice excellent oral hygiene
  - Rinse regularly with baking soda/salt water
  - Ice chips during chemo (some drugs) may reduce mouth sores
-