

ORAL HEALTH AND HEAD AND NECK CANCER TREATMENT



ORAL HEALTH AND HEAD AND NECK CANCER TREATMENT

This information aims to help you understand how the treatment of head and neck cancer may affect your mouth. It may help answer some of your questions and help you think of other questions that you may want to ask; it is not intended to replace advice or discussion between you and your cancer care team.

Your [cancer care team](#) may recommend a pre-treatment check-up with your regular dentist (or refer you to a dentist that works with the multidisciplinary team), to discuss side-effects of head and neck cancer treatment and how you may manage these.

HOW HEAD AND NECK CANCER MAY AFFECT ORAL HEALTH

Treatments for head and neck cancer, especially radiation therapy, can cause side effects. These issues may arise early during treatment, or be experienced later and persist for the remainder of life. Side effects may affect the teeth, lining of the mouth or jawbone, such as:

- **Dry mouth (xerostomia):** Radiation therapy may affect the salivary glands and change the quality and quantity of saliva produced. This may cause dental decay, gum disease and difficulties with speaking or chewing.
- **Tooth decay:** Saliva is the body's natural defence against tooth decay. Without adequate saliva to wet the mouth, wash away food and neutralise the acids produced by plaque, the teeth are at a greater risk of rapid and aggressive tooth decay.
- **An increase in mouth ulcers or inflammation (mucositis):** When cancer treatments break down the cells that line the mouth and leave the tissue inflamed, there is a risk of ulceration and infection.
- **Taste disturbance:** Cancer treatments may alter the sense of taste; it is often reversible but may take many months or sometimes even years after the treatment is completed. However, if your work or lifestyle depends on your ability to taste food (e.g. you are a cook or a wine-maker) you should discuss your concerns with your doctor.

- **Difficulty opening your mouth fully (trismus):** Sometimes surgery or radiotherapy may make it difficult to open your mouth wide. This may be permanent or temporary and may limit your ability to eat normal food leading to poor nutrition. Trismus can also affect your ability to speak and clean your teeth.
- **Bone death (Osteoradionecrosis):** The death of some of the jawbone may occur in some patients having radiation therapy. Special care needs to be taken after radiotherapy if you are having extraction of a tooth or surgery on the jaw.

These side effects may hurt and make it difficult to eat, speak or swallow. It is important to take care of your teeth and mouth during head and neck cancer treatment because infections can be harmful and slow down your treatment.

HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS THAT YOU MAY SEE AS PART OF CANCER CARE

A dentist is an important member of the cancer care team before, during and after head and neck cancer treatment. Many people only see their dentist when they have a problem, but after radiotherapy is very important to prevent problems before they start. By having regular dental check-ups, side effects can often be prevented or reduced.

- **Before treatment:** It is a good idea to have a dental check-up. Your dentist (or a dentist that works with the multidisciplinary team) will check the health of your mouth and teeth and give you a plan to keep your mouth healthy. Sometimes teeth that are decayed are unhealthy, need to be removed before radiation therapy to reduce the risk of problems after treatment.
- **During treatment:** Your dentist will look out for any mouth side effects that you may have.
- **After treatment:** Visit the dentist every six months for a check-up, the side effects of radiation therapy on your teeth can last for your whole life.

KEEPING YOUR TEETH AND MOUTH HEALTHY

Good dental hygiene at home is important to maintaining a healthy mouth and teeth. Tooth decay is much faster and more severe after radiotherapy. The following are things that you can do help keep your teeth and mouth healthy:

- Drink plenty of water and chew sugar-free chewing gum to keep your mouth moist.
- Gently brush your teeth, gums and tongue with a soft toothbrush after every meal and at bed time.
- Gently floss your teeth every day.
- Use high-strength fluoride toothpaste.
- Use an alcohol-free mouthwash.
- Reduce intake of foods that may accelerate tooth decay, such as those high in sugar or acid content.

TOOTH EXTRACTIONS

Your dentist may recommend taking out teeth that are broken, infected, or decayed. This is because unhealthy teeth may cause problems after radiation therapy such as osteoradionecrosis (bone death). These teeth are usually removed before the radiation therapy starts because bone and gum that has been radiated may not heal after a tooth extraction.

IMPORTANCE OF ONGOING DENTAL CARE

Your dentist plays an important role in your treatment for head and neck cancer. Side effects can often be prevented or reduced through regular dental check-ups before, during and after treatment. After your treatment, you should visit your dentist every 3 months for a check-up because the side effects of radiation therapy on your teeth can be long lasting.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR DOCTOR

- Will my cancer treatment affect my oral health?
- Do you think I would benefit from seeing a dentist?
- What can I do to improve my oral health?
- Should I be using special products to improve my oral hygiene?
- Will changes to my oral health be permanent?
- Will I need any tooth extractions?

You may want to write additional questions here for your doctor or cancer care team

About Head and Neck Cancer Australia

Head and Neck Cancer Australia (formerly Beyond Five) is Australia's only charity dedicated to providing information and support to people living with head and neck cancer, caregivers, family and healthcare professionals.

Head and Neck Cancer Australia's mission is to improve the quality of life of everyone affected by head and neck cancer through education and access to support and to raise awareness of head and neck cancer nationally.

Head and Neck Cancer Australia supports people through their cancer journey, from diagnosis to treatment and life after cancer by providing comprehensive, easy to understand and easy to access information. We have the only Directory of Head and Neck Cancer services and support groups available in Australia and New Zealand helping people to find the right services and support when they need it most.

Phone: 1300 424 848

Email: contact@headandneckcancer.org.au

Web: www.headandneckcancer.org.au

Head and Neck Cancer Australia Disclaimer: You acknowledge and accept that the information in this factsheet is for general information purposes only. It is not intended, nor should it be relied on, as medical or legal advice, or as a substitute for consultation with a physician or other licensed healthcare provider. You agree that if you have individual healthcare-related questions you should contact your doctor promptly and should not disregard professional medical advice, or delay seeking it, because of information contained here. You also agree that Head and Neck Cancer Australia is not liable for any injury or damage to persons or property (howsoever caused, including by negligence) arising out of or related to any use of Head and Neck Cancer Australia's patient education materials, or for any errors or omissions.

First Published: 2016

Last updated: November 2020