

Oral Care after Radiation Treatment

Head and Neck Cancer

Radiation treatment

Radiation is a necessary part of your treatment and recovery from cancer. It comes with side effects, many of which will improve in the weeks and months following radiation. However, some side effects will be long-term or permanent side effects. It is important to see your dentist regularly to manage side effects and ensure comfort and lasting oral health.

Long-term side effects post radiation treatment

Possible long-term or permanent side effects post radiation treatment include:

- **Dry Mouth (Xerostomia):** If the radiation field has encompassed your salivary glands there will be a reduction in quality and quantity of saliva. Without good saliva to protect your teeth, rapid decay may occur. Fortunately, high fluoride toothpaste will protect your teeth from rapid decay.
- **Weakened Teeth:** The radiation can denature the bonds in teeth leading to rapid decay. Fortunately, high fluoride toothpaste can strengthen your teeth and protect them from rapid decay.
- **Osteoradionecrosis (Poor bone healing):** Bone within the high field of radiation may lose the ability to heal. Osteoradionecrosis (ORN) can be caused by tooth extraction, trauma or an ill-fitting denture. It is important to avoid the extraction of any tooth from a high radiation area. Your dentist may consider root canal treatment or refer you to an Oral Surgeon for specialist advice. You should stop wearing any denture which is rubbing and seek help from your dentist.
- **Trismus (reduced mouth opening):** Radiation may lead to fibrosis of the muscles involved with opening your mouth. This is typically a late onset side effect. The best way to avoid trismus is jaw exercise to keep your muscles active. Open your mouth as wide as you can and repeat ten times. Do three sets of this through your day. Your speech therapist will support you with these exercises.



Oral care after radiation treatment

It is important to maintain good dental hygiene after radiation treatment. To keep your teeth and mouth healthy, the following tips will help:

- Most importantly, use a high fluoride toothpaste forever. **NEUTRAFLUOR 5000** is available behind the medicine counter at your pharmacy. Begin using this toothpaste when your mouth is no longer tender (about two weeks after radiation) and continue using forever. At night, spit but do not rinse. The fluoride needs to soak into your teeth for 30 mins.
- Brush twice a day (or after each meal).
- Floss daily or use an interdental brush such as Pikster.
- Consider applying tooth mousse at night after you have brushed. It can enhance the action of fluoride.
- Keep mouth and lips moist with frequent sips of water and consider using dry mouth products.
- Visit your dentist every 6 months.

Dry mouth products

The following products can help to maintain a healthy, moist mouth:

- Dry mouth rinse or gel (available at the pharmacy)
- Xylimelts - An oral adhesive disc which adheres to your gum and slowly dissolves, relieving dry mouth. (Available at the RBWH pharmacy or online)
- Sugar-free chewing gum

Your questions

If you are unsure about anything in this fact sheet, please write down questions for your care team:
